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Love Stories of the Real West

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Misdeal

By ELSA BARKER

Second February Number

Behold! he sees what no human eye has glimpsed since the beginning of time

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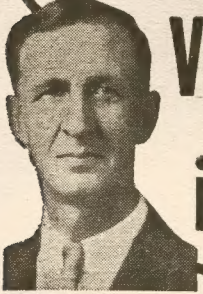

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FANNY ELLSWORTH
Editor

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Misdeal

By Elsa Barker

Was he really irresponsible, this seemingly carefree young cowboy with the gambling instinct? Lucy felt she had to know before she could dare to let her heart be won in this strange new and exciting Western country.

CHAPTER I

TO MOST folks it would have seemed funny that a man like Walt Carmack should be digging post-holes any time, much less out in the blistering heat of a mid-June sun. Walt was the grandson of old Lucky Jim Sanderson who owned the Lucky Diamond Ranch, and he and his semi-invalid mother were the only relatives the old man had left. The Lucky Diamond was a fair-sized outfit, with work to keep from eight to ten punchers busy most of the time.

Walt didn't mind digging post-holes but he was getting tired of being shoved off onto every dirty, menial task there was to do on the ranch. He could have done something about it if he had been cut from a different piece of goods. He could have gone squawking to his grandfather, or he could have flatly refused to do the work assigned to him. Instead he had tried to be fair-minded about it.

In a way he could understand how Ford Harrell, the foreman, felt about him. Ford had worked for Lucky Jim for thirty years. For the past twenty he had been foreman of the Lucky Diamond, but ever since Walt and his mother had come back to the ranch to live after the death of Walt's father, two years before, he had been scared stiff that he was going to be put out to grass and the young heir to the ranch given the job he loved.

Walt shoved his hat back, wiped dripping sweat from his forehead and took a generous swig of water from the canteen on his saddle.

He squinted approvingly down the straight line of new cedar posts he had set. There was a certain satisfaction in doing a good day's work even when he knew he'd never get any credit for it.

He paced off the distance for the next post, lined it up with his eye, and jammed the post-hole digger into the ground for a generous bite of earth.

From around the curve of the little rocky rise on his right came the sound of horses' hoofs and the metallic rasp of buggy wheels scraping on rock.

The buggy was a brand-new, spic and span affair, its red wheels still shiny from

factory paint, and drawn by a quick stepping, high-headed black horse. Riding alongside at a slow jogging trot was the Lucky Diamond foreman on the high-hipped, bony gray that was his favorite mount.

The thick-shouldered man on the buggy seat was as immaculate, his English riding boots as shiny as if he, too, had just been turned out of a factory. Gene Chipman, the banker from Cosecha, was in a way a man of mystery. Even the folks who lived in Cosecha and thought it the finest town in the world were aware that it was odd a man of Chipman's wealth and sophistication should settle down and open a bank in this sleepy little town, thirty miles from a railroad.

He had been there three years now, and because he never talked about his past, there had been many wild rumors about him; but after the first year the gossip had mostly been kindly, for the banker had a way with him. Even when he went about the unpleasant business of foreclosing mortgages and calling in loans he seemed anxious to make it as painless as possible.

They pulled up alongside the fence and Walt saw Ford Harrell's practiced eye squint down the line of new posts. When he turned back to the cowboy there was grudging approval in his hard eyes.

Chipman grinned at the cowboy.

"Ford certainly doesn't know much about diplomacy, does he? Doesn't he know he ought to butter up the old man's grandson? Why don't you find this boy a nice, soft job closer to home, Ford?"

He sounded as if he meant it as a joke, but it was the wrong thing to say. Ford Harrell's stocky body stiffened. His voice had the rasp of pent-up irritation in it.

"As long as I'm ramroddin' this ranch there'll be no soft jobs for anyone. Walt can take my orders or one of us'll get off the ranch!"

It was the same challenge Walt Carmack had had flung at him nearly every day for two years. He was tired of it, but in a way he was on the spot. He knew how much Lucky Jim thought of his foreman, he knew how faithfully Ford Harrell had served Lucky Jim for years, and he didn't like the idea of busting up a friendship like that. Anyhow, he didn't figure he was much of a man if he couldn't stand a little heckling for the peace of mind of his frail mother and old grandfather.

He looked Ford Harrell in the eye and grinned a little. "You ain't heard me complainin' have you?" he asked easily.

Harrell's answer to that was a grunt. "Mr. Chipman wanted to drive up the Mesa road, an' I thought maybe you could tell him whether it's passable since the May rains."

Walt eyed the slim-legged horse, the bright, new buggy wheels. "It's mighty rough and steep."

"Passable?"

"Maybe. If you don't mind takin' the chance of breakin' a wheel—an' your horse ain't spooky."

"Maybe I better give up the idea. I wish I could ride horseback. I hurt my back when I was a kid and I have to be mighty careful." Chipman smiled apologetically. "I'm going to have to close a loan to old man Eastman. He's got a little piece of land up beyond Cerro Pelón. Thought I'd take a look at it, and if it appealed to me I'd take it and call the deal square."

Walt looked at him curiously. In his experience bankers didn't usually discuss the details of their business with casual acquaintances.

"You've been buying up quite a few pieces around here lately, ain't you?" he asked idly. "What you want it for? Goin' into the ranchin' business?"

Chipman laughed and shrugged. "No. Damned if I know what I want it for. I just like the feeling of being a land owner, I guess. Anyhow, land's about as solid a thing as a man can put his money into these days."

Ford Harrell gave him an amused, slightly sour look. "Well, in case you do go into the cow raisin' business, maybe you'd like to come along with me an' Walt an' learn how to pull porcupine quills out of a bull's nose."

Chipman laughed again. "Sure! I always did like to watch a rodeo."

Harrell turned to Walt. "It's that new bull of Lucky Jim's. He's just around the hill. We'll round up a little bunch of cattle and shove them with him down to the corral at the Ojo Feliz."

"Why bother to run him in a corral? We can handle him where he is. That gray of yours'll hold an elephant an' my bay ain't no featherweight."

The foreman's heavy gray brows met in a scowl. "No," he disagreed—from habit. "We'll—"

Walt brought a coin from his pocket. "I'd sure like to get the rest of them posts set, an' it's a long way over to the corral," he said amiably. "I'll flip you for it. Heads we rope him where he is, tails we take him to the corral."

The banker chuckled. "Be a sport, Ford. Why, gosh man, if you can handle a rope anything like Walt here, you won't have any trouble."

When it was put like that, there wasn't much the foreman could do but give in. He was proud of his roping skill and resented the implication that any squirt not more than ten years out of knee pants could outclass him.

Walt tossed the coin. Both men bent over it.

"Looks like I win," Walt said, picking up the nickel and pocketing it.

Ford Harrell nodded. He looked out of temper but he didn't try to welch on his bargain.

The bull was a big one and the quills had been in his nose long enough to put him in an ugly mood. He came around the hill bellowing death and destruction at anything that might be in his way, pawing the ground every few steps.

"I'll take his head," Ford Harrell said quietly.

Walt nodded. Whatever else his faults, Harrell was not a man to shirk his share of a dangerous job. He was the kind of a hand Walt liked to work with.

The bull made no effort to get out of the way. Twelve feet away Harrell's loop snaked out and landed neatly over the big horns. Like the smart cowpony he was, Harrell's gray tightened the rope. The bull stood stock still for a moment, then with an angry rumble deep in his throat, he lowered his great head and came straight for the gray.

Instantly Walt dabbed a loop on one hind foot. Both horses, working like a team, jumped to tighten the ropes, and nearly a ton of bull meat flopped to the ground, bellowing impotent rage. . . .

Grinning a little because to him work like this was always fun, Walt Carmack swung down from his saddle, an extra lass rope over his arm. With one hand on the tight rope, he ran toward the helpless bull. Halfway there he heard the sudden spine-chilling whirr of a rattler. One jump carried him a good six feet forward and in the same second he felt the rope in his hand go slack as his horse spooked at the deadly noise.

Ford Harrell, likewise off his horse, saw what had happened and turned for his horse. Skittishly the gray shied sidewise. Now the bull was on his feet. He kicked twice and the loosened rope slipped off his hoof. He stood still for a moment, swinging his head from the gray to the bay and back again as if trying to make up his mind which enemy to tackle first.

Just as Harrell's boot reached for the stirrup the bull charged. The gray reared and backed away, and the foreman stumbled and fell to the ground. One of the horse's flashing front hoofs struck him as the animal lunged sharply backward, trying to remain true to his training and keep the rope taut.

Harrell groaned and lay still. Walt cast a quick, desperate look about him. The bull was a valuable animal and he didn't want to kill him unless necessary. If he wasn't already fatally injured, Harrell was comparatively safe as long as he lay flat on the ground. The bay was edging away with the high-headed, wise look of a horse that doesn't aim to be caught if he can help it. Walt swore at him, made a grab at the trailing rope, and missed.

Then as the bull made another charge at the now panic-stricken gray Walt sprinted after him, twirling the extra lariat. He jerked the loop over a hind foot again and dug in his boot heels. His weight slowed the bull some, but didn't anywhere near stop him. Walt was yanked roughly forward. Desperately he caught the rope around his bent left elbow for a more secure grip and yanked out his sixgun with his right.

The rope twisted tight, and there was a bruising pain in his left arm as he squeezed

the trigger. As the rope jerked him down, his forehead hit a rock and the world went black.

Ford Harrell groaned and sat up slowly. Gene Chipman jumped down out of the buggy and ran to his side.

"Hurt bad, Ford?"

The old cowman's lips were twisted back from his teeth with the effort not to groan again. He shook his head dazedly.

"I reckon not," he managed to say slowly. "Feels like my ribs. Where's Walt?"

"Lying over there. Looks like he might be dead."

"We better see."

He rolled to his knees, then with the banker's help got painfully to his feet.

Together they turned the cowboy over on his back. There was an ugly, bleeding bruise on his forehead, and one arm was twisted at a grotesque angle away from his body. Ford Harrell stooped to lay an ear against his chest.

"Heart's still beating. Good thing we got a buggy here. It ain't very easy on a hurt man to pack him in on a horse." He rubbed his hand slowly over his own forehead as if still dazed from pain. "You reckon you can catch my gray for me, Gene?"

The banker gave him a funny look. He pulled a pint flask of whiskey from his hip pocket.

"Take a swig of this," he said quietly. "Then turn around and look."

Harrell looked before he took the drink. Twenty feet away lay the huge motionless hulk of the shot bull. Still quivering with fright, a horn rake dripping blood from his shoulder, the gray still held the rope to the bull's head taut.

Pride came into Ford Harrell's gray eyes.

"Damn good horse!" he said, and tipped the bottle to his lips.

Walt Carmack was a big man, six foot one in his stocking feet, big-boned and heavy-muscled. Lifting his inert weight into the buggy was no easy chore, with Ford Harrell panting with pain at every movement. But finally it was done. Chipman looked at the foreman's gray, drawn face.

"You ride in the buggy," he offered, "and I'll bring the gray."

Ford Harrell shook his head slowly.

"Lucky Jim would think I was gettin' old and soft," he said, trying to joke. "I've ridden a horse when I was hurt a heap worse'n this."

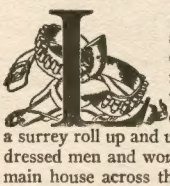
Chipman brought a coin out of his shirt pocket.

"Look," he said softly, his black eyes sober. "I don't like to tell tales out of school—but—I found this in the grass over there where Walt fell. Maybe you ought to see it."

Harrell took the coin and turned it over in his hand. It was like an ordinary nickel, except there was an Indian head on both sides. Slowly the old foreman's gnarled knuckles clenched tight around it, and for a moment as he looked up at the unconscious cowboy in the buggy, his eyes were murderous. But when he turned again to the banker he was the cold-eyed, hard-tongued foreman who kept punchers on the Lucky Diamond strictly in line.

"Thanks, Gene. I'll settle with Walt for this later. You forget it!"

CHAPTER II



LUCY McADAMS stood by the front window in Foreman Harrell's little stone cottage and watched a couple of buggies and a surrey roll up and unload a bevy of party-dressed men and women in front of the big main house across the yard. A half-dozen saddled horses were already tied to the hitch-rail in front, their riders heel-squatted, chatting in a circle. Lights began to blink on all over the big house, and Lucy could hear the occasional scrape of a violin string as a fiddler tuned up.

Nothing that the woman in the employment agency in Indianapolis had said, and certainly nothing she had ever read about the West had prepared Lucy for the Lucky Diamond Ranch.

A door opened behind her and with a swish of long silken skirts another girl came into the room. Millie Harrell was a tall, fair-haired girl, big-boned and a little angular, but still good looking in spite of the wind-roughened brown of her face and

arms. She was only eighteen but the responsibility of keeping house for her father and looking after a younger brother and sister made her seem older. She smiled at Lucy, and when she spoke her voice was low and musical.

"You're prompt, Miss McAdams. Maybe you can teach me and the kids how you do it. We nearly drive Dad crazy, always being late."

Lucy smoothed the skirt of her plain black dress apologetically.

"I'm sorry I didn't bring anything more partyish with me. I wasn't expecting anything like this!"

"Why, you look awful pretty," Millie said reassuringly. "Anyhow, nobody ever worries about clothes at one of Lucky Jim's parties. Everybody's invited—and everybody comes. Like as not there'll be a dozen little homesteader girls over there with gingham dresses on, but they'll all have a good time."

She broke a bright red blossom from a potted geranium in the window. "Here, stick this over your ear. It'll look pretty against that black hair of yours. If you're ready well go over now. There might be something I could do to help Mrs. Carmack. These parties are always a big job for her. She has a house full of Mexican girls to help, then she always winds up doing everything herself and making herself sick. Susie will be here to see that Dad washes his ears and gets into a clean shirt without more than two or three buttons missing."

She linked her arm through the older girl's and, still chatting easily, led the way out onto the porch and across the yard. The heel-squatting punchers stood up when they saw the two girls coming, and Lucy saw their eager glance turned on her. Millie waved at them cheerfully.

"You boys can meet Miss McAdams later. We're busy now."

The cowboys, all of them young, some of them looking to be still in their teens, smiled shyly, and with a sudden rush of friendly feeling Lucy smiled back.

She hadn't expected to like the West. Coming here to tutor the two younger Harrell children through the summer to make up for the school term they had missed due to a bout with scarlet fever, was a kind of self-imposed exile from the kind of life and the kind of people she liked. As soon as she dared she would go back to it. But Millie Harrell was as nice as any girl she had known back home, and already the unaffected friendliness of these people was melting a little of the hard core around her heart.

Millie was still talking as they went up the wide stone steps of the big house.

"You'll like Lucky Jim, Miss McAdams. He's a square-shooter if there ever was one, even if he never had much time to really get acquainted with folks until the last few years. Now, Dad says, he's having the fun he never had when he was younger. He started from scratch—an orphan without a penny to his name—and from the stories they tell about him, I guess he had to fight every step for what he's got now. In those days there were Indians, outlaws, rustlers, as well as crooked politicians. Thank goodness those days are over with now. There hasn't been a speck of trouble on this range for five years. Lucky Jim, he just fiddles around and has a good time while Dad runs everything smooth as clock work."

She reached out a hand for the doorknob, but it swung open from the inside before she touched it. Two tall young cowboys stood in the doorway. They were both good looking, with the slim-hipped, wide-shouldered build Lucy had noticed seemed to be fairly common among cowboys.

Millie Harrell gave a soft little exclamation under her breath.

"Walt Carmack! I supposed you'd still be in the hospital!"

The taller of the two, a black-haired, blue-eyed young giant, grinned down at her. His left arm was in a sling, and there was the red, angry-looking scar of a recently healed wound across his forehead.

"I'm not as fragile as I look," he said.

The other cowboy tapped the tall girl lightly on the shoulder. "You're forgettin' your manners, Millie. Why do you reckon we busted over here to open the door for you?"

The girl gave a half exasperated little laugh.

"Miss McAdams, I sure hate to begin your troubles this quick, because I know you're liable to have these two devils under-

foot all summer." Her voice was still cheerful and easy, but to Lucy it seemed that some of the warm, rich quality was lacking now. "Miss McAdams—Walt Carmack, Lucky Jim's grandson—and Billy Gamel."

Lucy looked up smiling into a pair of twinkling blue eyes, then into a bright brown pair. She felt her pulse quicken a little. Maybe this idea of tutoring on a ranch wasn't going to be such a bad one after all.

Millie Harrell laid a hand on the tall cowboy's shoulder. "Walt, do me a favor, will you?"

"Sure, Millie."

"Keep out of Dad's way tonight. He's still ringy about those two ribs you got busted for him."

"Heck, what's two busted ribs to get roily about?" Billy Gamel asked cheerfully. "They tell me ol' man Adam *lost* a couple one time—and look what it got him!"

"Broken ribs, a broken arm, and a cracked head!" Lucy said. "What do you call 'not a speck of trouble'?"

"Not real trouble," the other girl assured her. "I hope."

Red-headed Billy Gamel chuckled. "Ford Harrell an' ol' Walt here, they got into an argument about the best way to pull porcupine quills out of a bull's nose, Miss McAdams."

Seeing the look of pretty disdain that came over Lucy McAdam's face, Millie Harrell hastened to explain.

"Oh, they didn't fight about it. It was the bull that knocked them around and lamed a good horse for a couple of months. Dad knew how strong and mean tempered that bull was. He knew they ought to drive him in to the corral to handle him. Walt was in a hurry and he wanted to try it out on the range. They flipped a coin to settle the argument—and Walt won."

Billy Gamel chuckled. "He always wins. The lucky son-of-a-gun!"

Millie made a soft, exasperated sounding little exclamation half under her breath. She opened the hand bag she carried over her arm, reached in it, then handed a coin to Billy Gamel.

"This fell out of Walt's pocket during that bull ruckus. Dad found it. Think about it, Billy, the next time Walt wants to flip a coin for something," she said quietly. "Dad didn't mind having his ribs busted if it was part of the day's work, but he hates to be cheated!"

The twinkle was entirely gone from Walt Carmack's eyes now. "I'm sorry about Ford's ribs, Millie, but that accident or worse could have happened in a corral the same as on the range."

Millie Harrell shrugged her disbelief. Billy Gamel turned the coin she had given him over in his hand. It was a nickel, but with an Indian head on both sides. He suddenly chuckled, reached out and slapped the taller cowboy between the shoulders so vigorously that Walt Carmack flinched away from him.

"Why, you old son-of-a-gun! So that's how come you got to go ridin' with Millie that Sunday I spent all mornin' groomin' an' shoein' her horse!"

Walt grinned and turned to Lucy. "The music'll be startin' in a minute, Miss McAdams. May I have the first dance?"

Billy nudged him with his shoulder. "Let's flip for it," he suggested shamelessly.

Even Millie Harrell laughed a little. Walt shook his head.

"Draw straws?"

Walt hesitated, then nodded, grinning. "I've got some matches. Wait till I fix 'em."

Lucy McAdams watched them, half amused, half angered at their bland ignoring of her right to choose her own partner. She was still feeling that way about it when, five minutes later, she danced away to the lilting strains of *Pretty Baby*. She looked up at Walt Carmack.

"You cheated him too," she said accusingly. "I saw you. The long one you were holding between your thumb and finger was broken in the middle. Either way he'd draw the short straw!"

Walt looked completely unrepentant. "Why didn't you tell Billy?" he asked mildly.

Lucy stopped dancing abruptly. Her face flushed angrily. "Why you big—" She stopped, floundered helplessly for a moment, then started over. "You're a big, conceited bag of wind! You're a cheat—and—and you're impudent! If you think I—"

WALT CARMACK

Walt put his arm around her firmly and forced her unwilling feet to follow as he started dancing again.

"I'm sorry," he said and sounded as if he really meant it. "I didn't aim to sound thataway. Besides, he didn't want to dance with you. He wanted to dance with Millie."

"Why didn't he ask her then?" Lucy couldn't help asking tartly.

Walt chuckled. "Millie treats him kinda rough sometimes. I reckon maybe he had some idea of tryin' the jealousy cure."

"Oh," Lucy said. She wasn't a flirt, but she felt a little piqued. She gave him a deliberately demure look from under long black lashes. "I suppose you're dancing with me for the same reason?"

The mischief was suddenly gone from Walt Carmack's blue eyes. "What do you think?" he asked softly, as his arm tightened around her.

"My turn, cowboy!" said a cheerful voice, as a hand slapped Walt smartly on the shoulder.

Walt scowled. Billy Gamel laughed, slipped his arm around Lucy's waist and they danced away.

Walt sauntered over to the open door, rolled himself a smoke and lighted it. The music stopped and when it started again he didn't join the stag rush to the corner where the little school teacher was standing.

Instead he hunted up Millie Harrell and danced once with her, then once with each danceable woman in the room. That duty done he went back and took up his stance by the door again.

Smoke from his cigarette spiraled over his head and drifted slowly out into the still night air. He leaned back against the doorframe while his eyes followed Lucy McAdams around the room. She was doing all right. All the cowboys who weren't too bashful were tagging her every ten steps. Girls of any sort were scarce in the cow country and ones like Lucy McAdams as rare as straight-legged cowboys.

But she didn't seem to be enjoying her popularity as much as most girls would have. If she'd loosen up a bit, get rid of that stiff, half frozen style of smiling and talking, she would be a mighty pretty girl. Her black eyes had the soft, velvety look of big black pansies, and her hair was a dark fluffy cloud around her piquant face. She was small and slender, and the way that plain black dress set off her cute little figure was an eyeful.

Now she was dancing with Gene Chipman, the banker from Cosecha, smiling politely at something he was telling her but looking as if she really didn't give a darn about anything he said. But Chipman, who had the reputation of being something of a lady killer, seemed to be liking the girl's indifference.

Out by the front step a bunch of young bloods who had stepped outside for a breath of fresh air, finished a good story and with a whoop of laughter turned and trooped back into the house.

One who seemed to be trailing in the rear of the group rather than being a part of it jostled roughly into Walt, staggered a little, and the heel of his shoe came down hard on the cowboy's toe.

It hurt and Walt grunted. The man's smooth-fitting dark suit, pale skin and slick hair, labeled him as probably a town product. Walt, who thought he knew every man, woman and child within a twenty-mile radius, could not remember ever having seen him before. While these parties of Lucky Jim's were open to anyone who wanted to come, it was not often that a complete stranger tried to horn in.

He put a hand on the man's shoulder to steady him. "Brother, if you don't dance any better than you walk, you're not goin'

to be popular with the gals tonight," he said.

The stranger turned a glassy eye on him and Walt caught a strong whiff of liquor. With a strength that seemed puny to the big cowboy he struck at the lean-muscled arm.

"I'll do my own worrying about that," he assured Walt in a voice that was thick and slurring. "The girls always go for me, all right!"

Walt grinned a little. Probably the man ought to be put outside again to air off a little, but he hated to start a brawl at his grandfather's party. He tightened his fingers on the stranger's shoulder and gave it a little shake.

"Behave yourself, Bud. I'll have an eye on you."

This time the man seemed not to have heard. The music had stopped and the dancers were slowly leaving the floor. The stranger looked the room over for a minute, then started across the floor, straight as a homing pigeon toward Lucy McAdams and the banker.

The girl's cool, reserved face came suddenly alive. From halfway across the big living room Walt couldn't accurately judge all the changes of expression that chased each other across her face, but he could see that she recognized the stranger, and that she was not any too pleased to see him.

The man was talking now and smiling. The girl shook her head. He laid a hand familiarly on her arm, and she drew back sharply.

Walt started across the room. The music started up again, but now everybody seemed to be looking at the three people still in the middle of the floor, and not many started to dance.

Walt put his hand on the girl's arm. "Wasn't this our dance, Miss McAdams?"

She looked up at him, her face red with embarrassment, not dead-pan any longer, thanking him mutely for his help.

"I—why—yes, I guess it was! Could we—"

"Now look here, Lucy," the man broke in, his voice rising even above the music, "if you're trying to ditch me after me following you for a thousand miles just for the chance to talk to you again, you're crazy! You act like you was ashamed of me!"

The girl's face got even redder, but her shoulders straightened and her chin lifted.

"I *am* ashamed of you!" she said sharply. "Coming in here drunk—without even an invitation, I'll bet—and making a scene this way." She looked up at Walt. "This is Clark Bowles—Mr. Carmack—Mr. Chipman. He comes from the same town in Indiana that I do and—and he's all right when he isn't drunk!"

The banker bowed politely, a peculiar little smile on his face. Lucy looked up at Walt again.

"Couldn't we—"

"Sure," Walt answered her. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Billy Gamel speak to the head fiddler. With scarcely a break they swung into the opening bars of *Red River Valley*. Millie Harrell moved over beside them and began singing, softly at first, then as heads turned to watch, her voice rose, clear and sure and of such a simple sweetness that a breathless hush fell over the room. Tired, worried frowns were magically smoothed from women's foreheads as they listened. A child over at the other end of the room suddenly stopped fretting. Even the drunk man standing between Gene Chipman and Walt Carmack straightened his shoulders, and a little smile smoothed away the sulky droop to his mouth, making him look almost boyish and nice.

Walt nodded to the big banker. They each looped an arm through the stranger's and quietly led him off the floor. After a moment Lucy McAdams followed. As she reached the door, Millie stopped singing. For a moment the breathless hush over the room held, then a wave of delighted applause seemed to rock the walls of the big old house.

CHAPTER III

THE dance had been in mid-June and it was now late July. So far it had been a hot, dry summer with scant rain even in the hills. Grass was short and cattle were beginning to show gaunt flanks. Only the hardy native cornfields seemed to thrive.

But in other ways it had been a pleasant summer. For one thing, Ford Harrell had

been called to Santa Fé for several weeks, as representative for the county, to attend a special session of the State Legislature called by the Governor to attend to a score of legislative chores it had neglected to finish in the regular January session. Among these was an emergency authorization for the sale of certain public school lands whose revenue from leases seemed to be less than could be secured by selling the lands and investing the money in certain high interest bonds now available.

During Harrell's absence some of the ranch management had naturally gravitated into Walt Carmack's hands, and it hadn't helped the foreman's temper any, on those Sundays when he came home, to find that things on the ranch rocked along on a pretty even keel without him.

After a persistent year-long courtship Billy Gamel had begun to make some progress with Millie Harrell. But in these few weeks Walt Carmack made none whatever, that he could see, with Lucy McAdams. Which hadn't bothered Walt much so far. Lucy was a pretty girl—fun to dance with, ride with, and tease—but that queer, cold self-restraint that she kept her heart locked up in, held him at arm's length. And until he found out whether there was really a warm, lovable girl inside that shell, he aimed to stay that way. If he had been really serious he would have had plenty of competition to worry about, particularly Gene Chipman who had the time and money and charm to sweep most any girl off her feet. And Gene seemed bent on doing just that.

For a while young Clark Bowles had hung around the ranch a lot. Apparently inclined to shiftlessness, when he was sober he was a good-natured kid with a certain breezy charm that made him popular in the bunkhouse. But Ford Harrell and Walt Carmack, for once seeing eye to eye, had perceived how uncomfortable his continued presence made Lucy McAdams, so when the regular chief clerk of the legislature got sick, they managed to get old Lucky Jim Sanderson and Gene Chipman to pull a few political wires that landed the temporary job for the kid.

Now the temporary truce over, Ford Harrell had come home from Santa Fé for the week-end tired and irritable. He had gone into a froth of rage on learning that a bad wire cut on one of his favorite saddle horses had somehow gone unnoticed and undoctored long enough for the wound to become infected and that the horse had had to be shot.

The full weight of his wrath had fallen unjustly on Walt Carmack's head, and he had wound up by sending Billy and Walt off to a "boar's nest" camp on a distant corner of the range for a whole month of fencing and windmill work.

Billy Gamel was taking out his bad temper swearing at the balky pack mule he was leading.

"A whole damn month!" he grumbled at Walt Carmack's broad shoulders ahead of him on the trail. "A month stuck way back here with the hoot owls, diggin' post-holes, polin' up corrals an' fixin windmills. If I was ol' Lucky's grandson, damn if I wouldn't try to do a little better by my friends. Course I know *you* just love to dig post-holes!"

Walt slid sideways in the saddle and grinned back at the disgruntled red head.

"Afraid maybe Millie will of forgot you in a month?"

"I know damn well she will," Billy said sourly. "An' she'll have plenty of help doin' it. Now you ain't got nothin' to worry about. You don't care if the pretty schoolmarm does marry Gene Chipman one of these days."

Walt's grin went a little wry.

"I can't do myself any more harm by leavin' than I already done by hangin' around," he admitted dryly. "She thinks I'm light-minded—an' she sure don't like my bettin'. Damn if I understand women," he went on savagely. "You an' I been workin' harder than any other four men on the ranch—an' Gene's been spending half his time lately sittin' around listenin' to her play the piano—an' yet she holds him up to me as a model of industry and propriety!"

They had reached the crest of a wide, flat-topped mesa. Billy spurred his horse and yanked on the pack mule's rope. The two men rode side by side for a few minutes without speaking, each nursing his own private sour thoughts.

Then Walt pulled a deck of cards from

his shirt pocket and began shuffling them.

"I offered Gene last night to cut for high to see who got to sit by her on the piano bench an' turn her music." He stopped, grinned and spread the cards out fanwise in his hand. They were all the seven of spades. He closed the deck, turned it end for end, and spread it open again. Now they were all the king of hearts.

"Sometimes I wonder if that girl's old man wasn't a gambler. She caught on right away, and boy, did she eat me out!" He chuckled. "Anyhow, she don't give me that cool, dead pan look no more. I bet I make her madder than anybody else alive!"

Billy looked enviously at the cards.

"I want to borrow that deck when we get back," he said, grinning. "Millie ain't near so quick to catch on—an' I can think of lots of ways it'll come in handy."

Walt suddenly pulled his horse up, leaned over and laid a hand on the rein of the other cowboy's pony.

"Billy," he said quietly, "look up there by that big rock butte. See that horse an' a little farther to the right the man with what looks like a surveyors' tripod? What the devil do you suppose he thinks he's doin'? There ain't supposed to be nobody up here but us! That gray looks a heap like the one Ford always rides."

"'Tain't Ford," Billy said positively. "He was goin' back to Santa Fé this afternoon."

As if in answer to Walt's question, a rifle cracked suddenly. The pack mule which had edged up close to scratch his nose against the tail of Walt's bay, suddenly squealed, reared high in the air and fell heavily to the ground.

Walt and Billy didn't have to talk it over to decide what to do. The man was far out of sixgun range. A second shot cut into the ground inches in front of Walt's horse. Whoever it was shooting that rifle meant business, and in another second, if he was any shot at all, he would have the proper range. Straight ahead of them another upthrust ledge offered the quickest cover.

At the sharp dig of spurs, the cowponies jumped into a run. They were almost at right angles to the man with the rifle, and as they shuttled behind the occasional round-topped junipers that dotted the mesa they made a hard target to hit.

The bullets still came at intervals, as if the man were taking careful and deliberate aim.

One whizzed through the crown of Walt's hat, so low that it scraped his scalp and nearly knocked him out of the saddle. The next one was lower. It ripped across the top of the saddle cantle. But the next instant they were safe behind a thick curve of rock.

Walt took off his hat and looked at the bullet hole through it. His head still felt dazed and crazy. Gingerly he put a hand up and touched the place that stung on his head. His finger came away stained with blood.

"Gittin' shot at always did rile me!" His lips were thin over his strong teeth. He swore thoroughly and completely.

Billy Gamel's face was a little white, but still he found a grin. "First time I ever seen a man's hair parted crossways, Walt!"

"I'm lucky to be still worryin' about how it's parted!"

"What you s'pose was ailin that booger? He was too far away to see who we were. Maybe he thought he was shootin' at somebody else."

"This is Lucky Diamond range. Nobody's got no business shootin' at nobody up here!"

A reckless light began to dance in Billy Gamel's brown eyes. He straightened in the saddle and gathered up his reins. "Shall we go git him?"

Walt hesitated. His eyes narrowed as he tried to remember just how the land lay up here. He shook his head.

"We'd have to cross a wide open strip to get at him. He's got a rifle an' our sixguns would be out of range."

He stepped out of the saddle and tied his horse to a nearby juniper. Billy Gamel followed suit.

"So far as I know," Walt said, "there's only two ways down off this mesa. The way we came up, an' another trail about a half-mile yonder, to the right. It goes down off the northeast corner of the mesa. You can't miss it if you—"

"I can't miss it? Look here, Walt, I ain't carin' about how to get down off this mesa right now. I'm goin' to find out why that guy opened up on us!"

"Wait a minute!" Walt laid a hand on his arm. "You find that trail like I said. There's a few trees there an' some big rocks that'll give you plenty of cover gettin' there. But from where he is, he'll be ridin' in the open a good quarter before he gets to you. So you can wait an' pick your own range!"

"Nice an' soft for me, huh?" said Billy, sounding disappointed. "An' what you goin' to do?"

"Go back around an' block the trail we come up, of course."

"You think maybe he's forgotten how to shoot since a few minutes ago?"

"I can drop off the edge of the rimrock right close here. There's a shelf ledge about ten, twenty feet down. I can work my way around on that."

"How you know he ain't skeedaddled while we stood here gabbin'?"

"Maybe he has, but I don't think so. He don't know just where we are now—he don't know we ain't got rifles with us—an' he'd have to cross into the open to get to either trail. He may wait until night to try to get away, but he won't wait longer because there ain't no water up here on top."

"Want to draw straws to see which one takes which trail?"

Walt shook his head.

"This is serious, not play-actin'. Besides, what's the use? I always win!"

"Okay." Billy shrugged, and Walt was a little surprised that he had given in to take the comparatively safe job with so little argument.

Billy strolled over to the edge of the mesa and Walt followed. For the first ten feet the break was sheer, then the wall of the mesa sloped off a little, still too steep for a man or horse to climb, but there were occasional breaks and benches where clumps of stunted piñon and juniper grew. Billy peered over the edge.

"Think you might try goin' down here?" he asked, and suddenly before Walt could move to stop him, he jumped. He landed on his feet, fell, rolled a foot or two and stopped against a piñon.

Walt swore, partly at the other cowboy, but mostly at himself for not realizing that was exactly the sort of thing Billy Gamel would do. Billy sat up, dusted the gravel off his hands and laughed at Walt's furious face.

"You idiot! You didn't think you could

LUCY McADAMS

work your way around here with a bullet through your head, an' one arm still in splints, did you?"

"Of course I could—an' dammit, I will! I'll toss a rope down to you an' haul you back up!"

"Like fun! You can't get me back up there until I'm ready to go! This is my turn to go huntin' while you play kitty at the gopher hole."

Billy put out a tentative foot and dug his heel in to test how solid the sloping ground was. It held. He stood up, put both hands against the wall and started inching his way sideways, kicking his heels hard into the soddy clay with every step to make solid footing. Walt swore at him again, but Billy kept going.

"Well, be careful then—you damn fool!" he growled.

Billy freed one hand from the wall long enough to hold it up over his shoulder and wag a couple of fingers in farewell.

Walt turned back away from the rim, torn now with indecision about what to do. His original plan was still a good one,

but he hated the part of sitting and waiting while someone else ran all the risks. Billy was brave to the point of foolhardiness sometimes, and while he wouldn't have minded making that climb himself, it turned him sick to his stomach to think of the gay young redhead perhaps falling and rolling to his death.

Also, there were places where the sloping ledge came close to the top, where Billy would have to duck and crawl to keep from being seen by the man on the mesa. Would Billy have sense enough to resist the temptation to peek over the top to reassure himself the man was still there —and thus give his hand away?

Disgusted with himself, worried and impatient, Walt untied his horse and swung into the saddle again. That second trail down, going as it did along the back of the mesa, was out of sight of the man on the rock ledge.

That added to the cowboy's self-disgust. His was the nice, safe, easy part to play. This second trail was seldom used and known only to a few people. There was scant chance that the man would try to get away from this side.

Near the head of this little used trail, Walt retied his horse to one side, out of sight in a clump of trees, and took his stance behind a big rock.

He settled himself as comfortably as he could, rolled himself a smoke and lighted it. It was nearly four now. He might have to wait here hours before anything happened. What in heck had made him ever think up such a cockeyed plan anyhow? Why hadn't they just rushed the guy like Billy had wanted to?

While his watch slowly ticked off half an hour he twisted, sweated, and batted at the big blue-green flies that, smelling blood, buzzed around his head and settled on his hands and face when he was still for half a second. With his mind he was trying to follow Billy's progress, guess when he would be safely around to the head of the trail. If he didn't hear any shots for another fifteen or twenty minutes, surely the kid ought to be safe.

And then suddenly he heard them—two of them! Rifle shots—and no answering spitfire from a sixgun!

Walt ran for his horse and hit the saddle. To hell with playing safe any longer! Those shots could mean only one thing—that Billy had somehow exposed himself!

He raced across the open and rounded the curve of rock where he and Billy had argued over their plans, just in time to see the rump of a gray horse disappearing in the edge of the piñons on the other side of the mesa. He dug his spurs into his own tall bay and leaned low in the saddle—then suddenly reined the horse sharply to the right, over toward the rimrock edge.

The man on the gray was getting away, but he would have to let him go. If he felt safe enough to make such an open break, it must mean he knew he had hit Billy.

Only a few hundred yards from the mouth of the trail but lying huddled against a juniper, twenty feet below the rim, he saw the cowboy.

With hands that were quick and steady in spite of the sick, shaky feeling down inside him, Walt tied one end of a lariat securely to his saddle horn, then went over the edge, hand over hand down the rope.

Billy's heart still seemed to be beating, but faintly and jerkily. With every heartbeat the blood was oozing in spurts from a round hole just under his collar bone on the left side. Walt went even sicker when he saw that hole, and he knew then that Billy's chances of survival were scant. He took off his shirt, tore out the sleeves and wadded them tight against the wound, then folded the rest of the shirt and buttoned it around the boy to hold the wadding in place.

He remembered with dismay that it was over ten miles back to the ranch. Billy, hurt as badly as he was, certainly couldn't stand to be packed in, jackknife style, across a saddle. He shouldn't even be moved, but neither could he be left here where there was scarcely room to stand without sliding downhill, and where if he awakened and tossed about with the strength of delirium he might go rolling off the ledge to certain death.

Walt slipped one end of the rope around Billy's shoulders, brought it up under his armpits and tied it under his chin with something like a hangman's noose. Then he

carefully climbed up the rope himself.

His horse spooked a little when his head appeared suddenly over the rimrock, but when Walt spoke to him he quieted. Then he pulled the wounded cowboy up over the edge. It was slow, hard work, for Billy Gamel was a big man, and Walt's left arm, while it had begun to heal and he could use his fingers, had no strength in it.

He made a bed of sorts for the cowboy where the spotty shadow of a juniper would shade his face for the rest of the afternoon, and forced a few drops of whiskey between his set lips. He put the canteen of water close by his side, where if Billy woke up and wanted it, he would be able to reach it. Then he swung into the saddle again.

CHAPTER IV

THE tall bay's sides were sweat-caked, and his knees shook from weariness when Walt stopped him at the ranch house just over an hour later.

A cowhand who had riden in from work a few minutes early was mending a saddle in front of the gear shed. As quickly as he could Walt explained what had happened, and sent him back to the foot of the mesa with a wagon, blankets and stretcher.

Then he went in the house and called the doctor in Cosecha. Dr. Watson was a brisk, businesslike man who didn't ask many questions, and Walt felt a certain tense relief that he didn't have to explain the whole grim accident over again.

Walt's mother had come into the room while he was telephoning. She heard a little, and guessed at more when she saw her son's haggard face, bloodshot eyes and the dried blood caked in his hair. Mrs. Carmack was a small, frail-looking woman with big blue eyes and a quick, nervous way of moving and speaking. Her own delicate health and her husband's recent death had made her over-solicitous toward Walt. She looked at him now with worried eyes.

"Do you intend to go out with Dr. Watson?" she asked, watching him anxiously.

The cowboy nodded.

"Sit down and rest a minute. It'll take him a half-hour at least to get out here. I'll go fix you a cool drink."

When she came back with the drink Walt took it, then gulped it down absentmindedly and resumed his restless pacing of the room. Presently he dropped wearily in a chair, leaned his head back and rubbed his knuckles over his tired and suddenly foggy eyes. From across the room his mother watched him narrowly without speaking.

Walt heard the wheels of the doctor's buggy when they scraped against the hitchrack as he pulled his team of lively bays to a stop. The cowboy roused and got up. He staggered a little when he walked, but he made it through the door all right. Out on the porch he suddenly swayed and dropped down in the wide porch swing.

The little doctor hopped nimbly out of his buggy. "Walt hurt too?" he asked.

"He was shot—but not bad I think. I can take care of him. He was dead set on going back with you and he was all in, so I gave him some of my sleeping tablets. I couldn't see any sense in him punishing himself any more."

The doctor shook his head at her. "Walt's a big boy now, dammit! Why don't you let him look after himself?"

Then as her big eyes filled with sensitive tears, he patted her shoulder briefly. "I'm sorry, Nellie. I didn't aim to hurt your feelings. Anybody here who can drive out with me? I may want to ride back in the wagon with Billy an' I'd like someone to drive my team."

Mrs. Carmack hesitated.

"Father's not here. None of the boys are in from work yet, and Millie's in town, I think—but Lucy McAdams is home. I'd hate to send some young girls out on a trip like that, but Lucy seems level-headed."

The doctor nodded. "Thanks, Nellie. Put that boy to bed and when I get back I'll have a look at him."

It was morning when Walt Carmack awoke. The shades on his bedroom windows had been drawn to keep out the sunlight. His mother was sitting quietly by his bed watching him. Outside there

seemed to be only an unearthly silence.

Walt still had the sick, hard feeling in the pit of his stomach that had been with him the day before, but it took him a couple of minutes to remember why he felt so bad. Then he sat up.

"Did they get Billy, Mom?"

His mother reached over and laid a gentle hand on his. "Billy's dead," she said quietly. "He died last night on the way home. Dr. Watson was with him, and he said there was nothing anyone could have done—even from the first. Only a man as strong and clean as Billy could have lasted as long as he did."

Walt swallowed. He ran a dry tongue over suddenly drier lips, but he couldn't speak.

Mrs. Carmack got up and went to the door. "I'll be in the kitchen, Walt," she said quietly.

Walt lay still for a few minutes, then because the ache all inside of him seemed suddenly too much to bear he got up and put on his clothes and went outside. The wide yards of the big house, the stone foreman's cottage and the bunkhouse were all quiet and empty. The whole place seemed to him to have a funereal air.

But the sun was shining as brightly as if yesterday a gay young redhead had not been murdered in cold blood.

Walt had known grief before—when his father died. But somehow that had been a little different. His father had been old and sick for a long time. They had known he was going to die. But now for the first time in all his twenty-five years Walt had seen sudden death come to one who was as young and full of life and laughter as himself, one who had been as close as an own brother.

Soon he would begin to think again about the identity of the man on the gray horse —he would begin to plan how to track down the killer—but now there was only this shocking sense of loss.

He saw Lucy McAdams over on the porch of the foreman's cottage. She had a book in her lap, but she didn't seem to be reading. She was sitting quietly with her eyes raised to the distant blue outline of the mountains.

Obeying an irresistible impulse. Walt Carmack's feet carried him across the yard toward her. He had a sudden hope that talking with her might somehow ease the intolerable ache in his heart.

The girl saw him coming, stood up suddenly, took one step toward the door, then sank back in her chair again. She waited for him quietly with her hands clenched tight around the book in her lap.

"They told you—about Billy?"

"I drove out with Dr. Watson last night."

Walt sat down on the edge of the porch. "I can't get over feelin' it was my fault. There was two jobs to do. I oughtn't to have let him tackle the dangerous one."

The girl looked at him with a kind of unwilling pity in her dark eyes. Then she said quietly, evenly:

"Billy sat up and spoke just before he died. He said: 'Walt—you hold the straws!' Then he sort of laughed—way down in his throat—and died!"

The girl's voice died away into a whisper. Walt raised his head and even through his foggy mind it seemed that she was looking at him strangely, accusingly.

"Walt," she begged and her voice broke now, "you didn't—you didn't draw straws with him up there? You didn't cheat him and send him around the dangerous way, did you?"

Walt Carmack looked at the girl incredulously. He stood up. "You believe that?" he asked.

"What—what else could I believe?"

"Why, I reckon you couldn't believe anything else," he said, still in that gentle, patient voice.

He turned and left her, walking now with his shoulders a little straighter, his steps a little stiffer, like a man determined not to be beaten down by whatever blows Fate seemed resolved to hand him.

Behind him on the porch, Lucy McAdams eyes suddenly and unexplainably filled with tears. She felt their warm trickle down her cheeks, and reached up a fierce hand to wipe them off.

"Oh, why did I say that?" she asked herself, half sobbing. "Even if I thought it! Even if I was sure of it, why did I have to say it?"

Millie Harrell came to the screen door.

Her eyes were red with weeping, her face white and haggard. She looked at the cowboy's tall, lean back. "Poor Walt! He and Billy were like brothers!"

Lucy's face twisted as from an actual physical pain. "Millie, why do I always say and do the wrong thing?"

The other girl came out and sat down beside her. "We all do sometimes," she said steadily. "I've been thinking all morning—maybe I ought to have married Billy when he asked me. But I—I wasn't good enough."

"You? Not good enough? What nonsense!"

Millie twisted impatiently.

"You don't understand. I mean—I didn't love him enough. And Billy deserved the best. Oh, I'd probably have married him some day if he'd kept asking me—because he'd have let me stay on here and look after Susie and Bob and Dad. But that would have been just second best. What I really want to do is go to Denver and study music. Maybe my voice isn't much good, but I'll never be happy until I find out."

Lucy laid her hand comfortingly over the other girl's brown, work roughened one.

"Susie will be old enough to take your place here some day, then you can go."

Millie shook her head.

"No, it was a crazy idea anyhow. I should have married Billy. Susie's only twelve. By the time she's old enough it'll be too late. Singers have too much to learn to start at twenty-four or five."

IT WAS nearly eleven o'clock. Lights were out in the foreman's cottage and the bunkhouse. Only one glowed in the big house. That one was in Lucky Jim's study.

Walt unsaddled his sweat-caked and weary horse and turned him in the corral, then went up to the house and pushed open the door of the study.

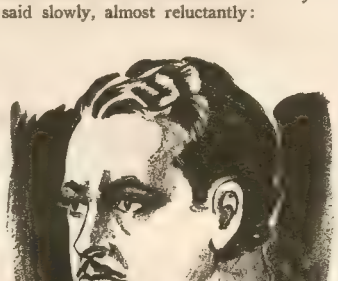
Old Lucky Jim was at his desk, pouring over a thick sheaf of bills and reports. He shoved them aside when Walt entered. He was a thin old man, almost as tall as Walt, with a thin, high-beaked nose, sharp steely blue eyes, and a gentle mouth that he tried to disguise under a sparse white mustache.

"Any luck?" he asked his grandson.

Walt shook his head, and threw his hat down on the desk.

"I went all over that whole damned mesa with a fine-toothed comb, but I couldn't find a thing."

Lucky Jim picked up a paperweight and fiddled with it for a moment. Finally he said slowly, almost reluctantly:



GENE CHIPMAN

"I ain't been blind to what's been goin' on here under my nose. I've seen how Ford's been ridin' you. I know how he feels about you. You got any idea it was him?"

Walt hesitated.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "He sent us out on work that didn't really need doin'. He knew which trail we'd take. An' he left the house here about two hours before we did, ridin' that gray horse of his. That would have given him about four hours extra before the Santa Fé train out of Oxville. I wasn't able to find anybody in either Cosecha or Oxville that saw him that afternoon. I'd sure like to know where he spent that extra time. But I can't get over the idea that that hombre up on the mesa wasn' layin' for us—that we took him by surprise an' he shot to keep us from comin' close enough to recognize him."

The old man took off his glasses, wiped

them carefully, then stuck them back on his nose.

"I hope so," he said. "Ford's been with me a long time. He's been a good man an' I would have sworn he was my good friend, too."

"That mesa is on one of the state school sections, ain't it?"

Lucky Jim nodded.

"I been wonderin' if that bill that's before the legislature now had anything to do with it."

"I don't quite see how."

"Neither do I," Walt admitted wryly. "It's just a crazy idea. Did you find out anything about who's pushin' that bill?"

Lucky Jim shook his head. "Not exactly. Senator Timmons from one of the southern counties drew up the bill. There's a lot of potentially good farming land down there that they can sell for a good price, while they're only getting about ten cents an acre on their yearly lease to stockmen. Timmons said he understood there was some of that kind of land on my range an' he thought the schools ought to have the money. So he included sections 2, 16, 32 and 36 in my two townships. But he couldn't remember just where he had gotten the idea.

"It was the same way with a lot of the legislators I talked to. They was in favor of passin' the bill as Timmons introduced it—but I couldn't trace the damn talk down to who started it. Ford's goin' to do what he can to get our two townships knocked out of the bill. If I have to buy that land, I will—although it'd sure cramp my style for a few years an' it wouldn't do the schools any good. I'm payin' them more rent now than they'd get interest on bonds."

Just then the telephone rang shrilly.

"I'll answer it," Lucky Jim said quickly. "That'll be Ford. He was goin' to call me tonight an tell me what happened to the bill."

The telephone was one of the wall crank kind and he had to get up and cross the room to answer it.

"Hello," he said, raising his voice the way country folks usually do into a telephone. "Hello—Ford? Yes—this is Lucky Jim." He listened a moment, and gradually a satisfied smile broke over his face. "Good work, Ford! Good night!"

He hung up, a broad smile on his face.

"Both houses passed it—after striking out our townships. The governor's satisfied. He'll sign it as it is. He told me yesterday he would."

He yawned and stretched like a contented, happy cat.

"Guess I better be gettin' to bed. I got to get up early in the mornin'. I'm startin' for Mexico tomorrow."

Walt grinned.

"Mexico? Mom'll sure raise Ned about the way you're tearin' around like a young blood these days."

The old man grinned back at him. He crossed the room and laid an affectionate hand on his grandson's shoulder.

"I wanted to send you, Walt. I figgered you might like to get away for a while, but Gene wouldn't hear to it. I reckon he's been listenin' to some of Ford's talk about you bein' a hell-raisin' young good-for-nothin'! However, I'd have thought he'd like to get you out of the way so he'd have a clearer field with that little McAdams girl."

Walt's smile faded. "I've got a job to do here," he said, ignoring that last crack. "But what's Gene got to do with it?"

The old man scratched his head.

"Reckon I never told you: I borrowed some money from the bank last year, speculatin' on a few more cattle. I put 'em on grass in Mexico an' from all reports I been gettin' they're doin' fine. But Gene's been gettin' worried about them. Said he'd go himself an' look 'em over if I couldn't get away. 'Course I couldn't let him do that. Gene may be a helluva smart banker, but he don't hardly know one end of a cow from the other."

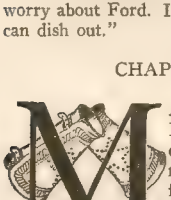
Walt couldn't have told why he didn't like the idea of his grandfather leaving just then. He had a vague hunch that the events of the past two weeks were all tied up together somehow—Billy's murder; the proposed sale of Lucky Diamond school sections that had been almost but not quite ordered by the legislature; and now his grandfather's sudden trip to Mexico. But it was just a feeling. He had no real reason for connecting them and he knew it.

Old Lucky saw his troubled look and misunderstood it. He thumped his shoulder again.

"You get along with Ford somehow until I get back. I'll whittle on him then, an' I'll make him see reason or I'll knock his stubborn block off."

Walt shook his head and smiled. "Don't worry about Ford. I can take anything he can dish out."

CHAPTER V



MAIL for the Lucky Diamond was delivered in one little tin mail box about a mile from the house. The mail carrier had a long daily circuit to make and he came early.

Because Millie Harrell was the quick, capable sort of girl who never seemed to need or even want another woman in the kitchen, Lucy McAdams had gotten into the habit of walking down to the mailbox before breakfast. By so doing she had made a firm friend of old Lucky Jim. He liked his daily paper with his breakfast. For years he had walked down to the mailbox himself, but now that he was older, he found he didn't often have the energy. Although he kept about the hands working for him, he was the kind of a man who wouldn't think of sending one of them to do what he considered a trivial personal errand.

This morning Lucy had gotten up a little earlier than usual. Lucky Jim was leaving today for Mexico, but probably he would still have time to read the paper with his breakfast.

Outside the air was clear and sweet and still. A big white rooster stuck his bright red comb out of the hen house door and greeted first the sunrise, then her. The big bay the girl had often seen Walt Carmack ride shoved his satiny nose over the corral fence and nickered softly. This reminder of Walt Carmack took away some of the brightness of the morning for her, but she stepped out briskly, determined not to think any more about him. Certainly she wasn't going to let the memory of the hurt she had inflicted spoil the whole summer on the ranch for her.

She honestly hadn't suspected until the day Billy was killed, that she was anything more to Walt Carmack than just another girl to tease. But what she had seen in his eyes for a moment on the porch that day had frightened her. The way she had hurt inside afterward had frightened her too. She had come within an inch of packing up and going back home the next day. But somehow she hadn't.

And of course that would have been foolish. Walt Carmack wasn't like Clark Bowles. Walt had kept his distance since then. When he had to talk to her he was carefully polite. He didn't tease her any more. If he had ever loved her, she had certainly killed that love. And as for herself—maybe she had been just on the verge of falling a little bit in love with him, but that was over now too. It was really easy to keep from falling in love if a girl would just use her head.

But thinking about it, arguing it all over with herself, wasn't making her feel any better now. She stepped along a little brisker, threw back her head and drew in deep breaths of the crisp air. Sometimes that helped.

A half-mile away she saw the mail carrier in his droop-sided, rickety buggy pull up to the mailbox. He had the packet of mail for the Lucky Diamond all ready, and the next minute his long-necked dun jiggle-jogged on down the road.

A moment later—and Lucy never could figure out why she hadn't seen him before, because he must have been in plain sight all the time—a horseback figure loped out of the partial shadow of a couple of big cottonwoods in the draw below the mailbox. He was riding a fast, big black, and except that he wore an extraordinarily large black stetson, he looked at that distance like any of the Lucky Diamond punchers.

For the moment she saw nothing particularly unusual about his actions. Then she saw the red bandanna over his face and remembered the mysterious rider who had killed Billy Gamel. She stopped dead in her tracks. Her knees started shaking

and she wanted to run, but she hated still worse to turn her back, and there was nowhere to hide.

The rider opened the mailbox, apparently sorting over the mail for a certain piece. She saw him select something, tuck it in his coat pocket, then he lifted the black into a fast lope that took him quickly over the first little hill to the east.

If he had seen Lucy at all he had given no sign of it. It had been too far away for her to recognize him, although she thought she would have known 'most any of the regular Lucky Diamond riders, even with a mask on.

She saw at once, when she looked through the mail, that Lucky Jim's morning paper was missing. But a newspaper seemed a queer thing to steal.

She left the mail at the big house and went on over to the stone cottage, her mind going like a coffee grinder. She knew she should tell someone what she had just seen. Maybe it had some reasonable explanation, maybe it wasn't important at all, but she would have to tell someone. But whom? Certainly not frail old Lucky Jim, just ready to start on his trip to Mexico. That really left only Walt Carmack and Ford Harrell—or possibly Millie.

But telling Millie woud be just the same as telling Ford, for of course the ranch girl would go straight to her father about it. Lucy liked and respected Ford Harrell, but he had an irritating way of smiling at things she said as if he thought she were even younger than twelve-year-old Susie.

She hated the thought of seeking Walt Carmack out, yet he at least might listen to her.

But when she went back to the big house after breakfast, Mrs. Carmack told her Walt had already left for the day. She didn't know where he had gone, probably to Cosecha, but possibly as far as the county seat at Oxville.

Lucky Jim, busy with last-minute preparations for his trip to Mexico, didn't mention having missed his newspaper, and Lucy, decided not to bother him by mentioning it.

She began to feel a little like a kitten chasing its tail. But once her mind was made up she could be a determined person. It was a Saturday and she was free for the day, so she saddled the gentle pinto Ford Harrell had assigned her and rode into Cosecha.

She stopped first at the drugstore, which was the only place in the sleepy little town that had a newsstand. She ran her eye quickly over the rack, then spoke to the soda jerker behind the fountain.

"Didn't the Santa Fé *New Mexicans* come in this morning?"

"Yes, ma'am, they did, but they're sold out. One man bought 'em all about an hour ago."

Lucy tried not to look as startled as she felt. "One man bought the whole bunch! For goodness sake! Who was he?"

"It was that greenhorn that used to run around with some of the Lucky Diamond punchers. Think he later got a job as clerk of the legislature."

Lucy stood perfectly still for a moment. Then she took a long breath. "Well, thanks," she said in a small voice.

When she went outside again her heart was pounding hard with anxiety. What in the world was Clark Bowles mixed up in now? The man she had seen this morning at the mailbox was a larger, heavier-shouldered man than Clark. She was sure of that. If she found Walt Carmack now, how much should she tell him? And what could be so terrifically secret in a public newspaper?

She stopped at the two general merchandise stores, but neither of them took the Santa Fé daily. Then she thought of the bank.

It had been open only a few minutes and Gene Chipman had not yet come in. He had a big desk at right angles to the tellers' cages and his secretary was sorting the morning's mail there now.

Lucy spotted the paper she wanted among the heap of other dailies. She picked it up.

"Miss Bradley, I wonder if I could borrow this? Ours didn't come this morning."

The secretary hesitated only for a second. She knew how much time Gene Chipman had been spending out at the Lucky

Diamond the past few weeks, and she knew this slim, dark-eyed girl was the reason.

"Of course, Miss McAdams," she said cordially. She motioned to the remaining heap of papers. "Mr. Chipman takes several others. He never reads them all."

Lucy tucked the paper under her arm and hurried out. She wished suddenly that she had thought to bring something to carry it in. Now that she had it, she was a little afraid. Then she told herself she was being silly. Clark Bowles wouldn't be mixed up in anything dangerous. There was no reason, either, for her to tie the stolen newspaper up with Billy Gamel's death. She was just spooky and nervous, that was all. But she wished she could find Walt Carmack in a hurry!

She stood for a moment in front of the bank, undecided where to go next. Cosecha wasn't very big. If Walt was in town this morning, she certainly ought to find him before long. There was one saloon, a restaurant, a rooming house and the railroad station besides the places she had already been.

A big man in a well fitting dark suit turned out of the saloon, two doors down the street, saw her and came toward her with a wide, welcoming smile on his face.

"Lucy! This is my lucky day! Were you looking for me?"

Quite irrationally Gene Chipman's ardent manner irritated the girl. He was everything she most admired in a man—or so she had told herself repeatedly. He was very good looking, steady, and dependable. He had nice manners and he owned a bank. He never teased her, and he seemed to weigh each word she uttered as if it were solid gold. He was, she now decided, a little too perfect, and womanlike she wanted to whittle him down.

Her answering smile was cool. "I was looking for Walt Carmack," she said.

Gene Chipman wasn't visibly deflated. "I haven't seen him," he said with that ardent, eager look still in his dark eyes. "You weren't looking for *him* in the bank, were you?"

Lucy brought the paper she had been holding half behind her around in front. "I stopped in to borrow this. Miss Bradley said you wouldn't mind loaning it."

For just a moment it seemed to the girl that there was a startled, annoyed look in his eyes. But this morning Lucy was in the mood to be suspicious of everyone.

"Anything special you wanted to read in it?" he asked casually.

Lucy looked him in the eye. "I don't know yet," she said coolly.

He frowned, but a moment later the fatuous look came back to his eyes. "Why not stay in town a while and have lunch with me? I'll drive you out in the buggy this afternoon."

Lucy shook her head, eager to get away from him. "Thanks, Gene. Some other day maybe. I must find Walt if I can and then go home."

When she inquired further in Cosecha she learned that Walt wasn't in town, and, as far as anyone knew, he hadn't been for a couple of days. So, disappointed and nervous, she had nothing to do but ride home again.

CHAPTER VI

SHE spent the rest of the day pacing the house and yards, but at ten that night, when she finally went to bed, Walt still had not returned.

She lay awake for a long time, her eyes fixed, through her bedroom window, on the dark, silent shadow of the big house. When along towards midnight a light blinked on in one of the upstairs bedrooms, a little smile touched the corner of her lips and her tense body relaxed under the covers. She watched the shadow of a tall man's figure move about the room for a minute or two, but she had dropped into a deep, dreamless sleep before the light went off.

She knew as soon as she awoke the next morning that someone had been in her room, apparently looking for something. Things weren't disarranged much, but neither were they exactly as she had left them.

Lucy suddenly forgot all her fear and nervousness of the day before and began to get mad. She jumped out of bed and threw on the first clothes she could reach.

Walt Carmack was home this morning and opened the door to her knock. His eyes were red-rimmed and tired-looking as if he hadn't slept much.

"Walt, can I talk to you a minute—somewhere where we won't be overheard?"

Surprise showed in his eyes. He motioned to the small room at one end of the long living room. "Here in Lucky Jim's office," he said.

She didn't take the chair he pulled out for her, but paced restlessly around the room for a moment, her big dark eyes burning with some strong emotion, her slim figure tense and wire taut.

"What's the matter, Lucy?"

Even in the state she was in Lucy's heart gave an involuntary little leap at the concern in his voice. Quickly she told him all that had happened the day before.

Walt listened the way she wanted him to listen—not as if he thought she were a schoolgirl spooked at her own shadow, but quietly, without interrupting, as if he believed her.

"And someone was in my room last night while I was asleep," she finished.

The cowboy put out a hand and touched her shoulder. "He didn't bother you, Lucy?"

She shook her head. "I didn't even wake up. I guess I was pretty tired. He was looking for that newspaper."

"Did he find it?"

A faint smile curved up the edges of the girl's lips.

"He found a three-day-old one I'd left lying on the table. The other one I'd hidden under the mattress. I don't know why I did it. I wasn't really expecting anyone to try and steal it." She drew the newspaper from under her light leather jacket. "I hope you can make more out of it than I could. I read every inch of it yesterday, but I couldn't find a thing to make such a fuss about."

"There's something in it all right," Walt said, and his confidence warmed the girl.

"I'm in this too, now. You'll let me know what you find out, won't you?" she asked with an eagerness that surprised herself.

Lucy McAdams couldn't quite understand what was happening to her. Certainly she had never expected to get involved in murder and intrigue, or to be shaken to the depths of her soul and lose her appetite because of the hurt she had seen in a tall cowboy's eyes.

But Walt Carmack didn't seem to see anything unusual about her interest. A smile warmed his tired eyes.

"I'm as puzzled as you are. But you've earned the right to know whatever I find out." He paused as if hesitating to bring the personal element into this talk. Finally he said, a little awkwardly: "Thanks, Lucy—for bringing' this to me—instead of someone else."

Millie had breakfast on the table when Lucy got back to the little house. She toyed with a cup of coffee and a piece of toast, trying to make herself eat because Millie was watching her narrowly, all the while her insides were churning with impatience. How long would it take Walt to read that newspaper? How long would it be before he would get around to telling her what he found? Of course if it was important, she couldn't expect him to come busting right over to tell her first, and with their relations still on the strained, polite basis she could hardly go tagging after him again to ask him.

It was important. And Walt did come busting right over—but not to see her. He came walking into the kitchen while they were still at breakfast. He held the crumpled newspaper in his hand and his eyes fixed on Ford Harrell, bleak with anger.

"Ford, I—" he began, and then stopped, seeming to be aware of the presence of the women and children for the first time.

Millie was a quick-witted girl. She stood up. "Susie, you and Lucy and Bob go in the front room for a few minutes. You're all through breakfast."

"You too, Millie," Ford Harrell said quietly.

She shook her head. "From the looks of things you two are going to need a referee."

Lucy Adams turned at the door, closed it, and came back to the table. Millie started to protest her staying, then closed her lips without speaking. Neither man looked at her. Walt's explosive anger seemed to

have calmed a little but his face grew hard.

"Ford, you've played lots of dirty, mean tricks in the last two years, but I never figgered you was an out an' out liar and crook!"

Ford Harrell's florid face went redder. His thick neck seemed to swell with anger.

We better go outside," he said. "There's no use messin' up a clean kitchen."

Millie laid a hand on his arm. It stopped his path to the door, but none of the rigidity went out of the set of his shoulders.

"Most men tell a lie every now and then, Walt," the girl put in mildly. "What's this one of Dad's that's got you so het up?"

"He lied to Lucky Jim about that school land bill. They didn't take Townships 18 and 19 out of it!"

"That's a damned lie!" Ford Harrell said violently. "I made the motion to strike out them myself, and there weren't a dozen votes against it!"

The very violence of his denial was somehow convincing. Walt Carmack flipped the newspaper open on the table.

"Read that!" he said, pointing with his forefinger. "It's a notice of public sale of certain school lands in the state—*including the school sections Lucky Jim leases!* It'll take eight sections of land right out of the middle of our range—and the only two good permanent springs on the whole place!"

Ford Harrell read the long notice unbelievingly, then through once again.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said slowly, and scratched his head. "That's what it says all right! But I know that bill was passed with these Townships 18 and 19 cut out. I know it, I tell you! I'm no fool—an' I'm no liar either!"

The man was either a good actor, or he was telling the truth. The anger slowly faded out of Walt Carmack's eyes.

"It's probably a newspaper misprint," Millie Harrell said sensibly. "Whoever fixed up that copy and sent it to the paper must have somehow got ahold of the original bill instead of the one that was passed."

"It's no misprint," Walt said grimly. "Somebody went to too much trouble to keep us from seein' this notice for it to be that kind of a misdeal."

Ford Harrell scratched his head again. "I can't figger it out," he said.

Walt looked at the chunky foreman. "I think I can," he said slowly. "Ford, if you're tellin' it straight—an' I can check up on that later an' find out if you ain't—that bill must have been doctored by somebody after it was passed—but before it was signed by the speaker of the House, the president of the Senate and the governor. You passed it on the last day 'long with several others—an' probably none of them took time to read each bill through before he signed."

Ford Harrell shrugged.

"Well, I can't see as much harm's done. If that's the case all they'll have to do is check over the minutes of the Legislature or ask anybody who was there."

Walt gave him a straight, hard look.

"Remember that story Lucky Jim likes to tell about the clerk of the Legislature who made a little mistake in a bill some years ago so that it read 'A measure to regulate the butchering of dogs'—instead of hogs? The Supreme Court held then that nobody had authority to go behind the signed and engrossed bill to correct it."

Ford Harrell looked fussed and as defensive as if he had been accused again. He rammed his hands fiercely down in his pockets. "Yeah, I remember it!"

Walt looked at Lucy. "Lucy, just how well do you know Clark Bowles?"

The girl's face was white and guilty looking. "I—why I—I've known him all my life. He lived next door. We were

In the First March Number

Journey to Ozone

A Rangeland Novel

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

raised together. But Clark wouldn't do anything like that. He doesn't know one township or one section from another. He'd have no reason to."

"Not if there was a nice chunk of money in it for him?"

The girl caught her breath sharply, remembering the things she knew about Clark Bowles.

"Maybe he would," she said unhappily. "I—I guess I don't know what Clark would or wouldn't do."

Walt Carmack's eyes were hard now, in them the look she had seen once before. "You don't trust your friends much, do you, Lucy?" he asked, almost gently.

"Walt, please don't!" she begged, and was surprised to see his eyes soften as he looked at her.

Millie moved over and laid a comforting arm around her shoulders. "Well, for goodness sake, Walt!" she said irritably. "Aren't you raising a big fuss about something that's really none of your business? Suppose the milk is spilled and that land's up for sale? I've heard Lucky Jim say he'd buy it if he had to. So what?"

"Lucky Jim's in Mexico, five hundred miles away by now," Walt reminded her grimly. "An' somebody took good care that he didn't see this paper yesterday mornin'—or that I didn't see it while there was still a chance of callin' him back."

"I think you're nuts," Ford Harrell told him bluntly. "Lucky Jim's going to be back in a week or ten days. That land can't be sold until it's been advertised in the paper for considerably longer than that!"

"I hope you're just dumb, Ford," Walt said, and his voice was edged with a dislike and distrust he made no attempt to conceal. "I hope that's the reason you keep tryin' to make me think everything's going to be fine and dandy—because I ain't convinced."

Ford Harrell's bushy brows met over his nose in a frown. He colored at the bite in the cowboy's voice.

"What you mean?"

"I mean," Walt said, speaking slowly and picking his words carefully, "somebody's trying to grab him a swatch of Lucky Diamond land. He shot Billy Gamel when we caught him surveying on the mesa to keep us from recognizing him an' tipping his hand. He bribed Clark Bowles to change a bill the legislature had passed. Now if Lucky don't get back in time, he can bid in that land for whatever price he wants to pay. It ain't likely there'll be anyone else want it, located as it all is clear inside our pastures."

"I don't think he'll stop at kidnappin' or—" he hesitated and his voice went a little husky—"even another murder, to keep Lucky Jim away!" He turned suddenly on the stocky foreman. "Ford, God help you if you're *not* on the level! I'll twist your neck off an' feed you to the buzzards if you try any monkey business while I'm tryin' to run this killer, to earth—an' get my grandfather back here!"

Ford Harrell was a quick-tempered man and jealous of his authority. He couldn't take that the way it was intended. He couldn't swallow his pride and remember the worry and grief that colored the cowboy's actions and words these days.

"You an' who else?" he asked mockingly. "Before you take me on, you better find you a friend to flip coins with an' get to do your dirty work!"

Lucy McAdams and Millie Harrell gasped audibly. Walt Carmack's face turned white. His right fist swung suddenly upward. Ford Harrell didn't have time to dodge, and he took the blow straight on his square, stubborn chin. It rocked him back on his heels.

Walt Carmack turned toward the door. His hand on the knob, he turned and looked at Lucy. "You know where I can find Clark Bowles?"

The girl looked at him with wide, unhappy eyes. She shook her head. "I—I haven't seen him but once since he went to Santa Fé. But I heard he was in Cosecha yesterday morning."

CHAPTER VII

LUCY McADAMS woke up with a start. Fear gave her a sudden, hard wallop under her breastbone. She lay still for a moment listening, every muscle rigid, then

finally screwed up enough courage to sit up in bed. The noise that had awakened her had seemed to come from the window. The room was light with moonlight, but she could see nothing except the familiar shadows of the room's furniture.

Slowly she eased back against her pillow, and after staring wide-eyed at the square outline of the window, her muscles relaxed and her heart stopped pounding so hard.

Ordinarily she was a sound sleeper, but lately she had been jumpy and restless. Everyone on the ranch was jumpy. Walt Carmack had been gone for three weeks and no one, not even his mother, had heard from his since he'd left. Neither had they heard from his grandfather.

Finally the girl sighed, turned over on her side, and closed her eyes. A moment later a shadow that had been crouching behind the big arm chair moved stealthily across the room.

The floor creaked once before he reached the bed and the girl's eyes flew open again. The next instant a hand clamped roughly down over her mouth. Another hand pressed tight against her shoulder.

The girl's slim body arched like the body of a fighting cat. She struck with all her strength at the hands that held her. The man leaned closer and spoke softly in her ear.

"It's Clark!"

The girl stopped struggling.

"Lord, Lucy, you're hard to wake up! I tossed chunks of 'dobe at your window for an hour. I thought I'd wake everyone on the place but you. If I take my hand away, you promise not to yell?"

She nodded. "You've got no business in here!" she said indignantly, when she could speak. "Why didn't you speak to me from the window? I was awake. I don't see—"

The hand came down over her mouth again. "Don't talk so damn loud!" he growled in her ear. "I didn't speak when you sat up because I knew you'd yell."

The hand over her mouth wasn't quite so tight this time. She jerked her head away.

"Clark Bowles, you stop that or I *will* yell! Now what do you want?"

"I want to talk to you. Get something on, and come outside."

Lucy hesitated only a moment. "All right."

She slipped on a kimono and shoes and climbed out the window after him. She looked uneasily around, knowing that in the bright moonlight they might be seen from a dozen different windows on the place.

"Clark, where have you been? Everybody's been looking for you."

Clark Bowles laughed shortly. "Don't be an idiot, Lucy. I've been hiding. What you suppose I hung around half the night for, waiting till everyone was in bed before I woke you up?"

The girl's heart sank. The things they were saying about him were true then. For a moment she was torn with indecision, pulled by a sense of loyalty to the new friends she had made here as well as affection for this weak-willed man she had known since she was a tiny girl.

FORD HARRELL

He pulled uneasily at her arm. "Let's walk down the road a piece. This damn place is all eyes and ears."

Lucy looked up at the protecting shadow of the big house, at the blank, black square that was Walt Carmack's bedroom window. But Walt wasn't here now. She couldn't ask him what to do. Out in the corral a horse stomped his foot. Then except for the raucous croaking of a lonesome old

frog out by the horse trough everything on the big ranch was still. Lucy shivered, only partly with the chill of night, remembering everything that had happened here in the past few months.

"Only as far as the horse trough," she objected. "No one can hear us from there."

"But they can see us. My gosh, Lucy, with that white nightgown sticking out from under your kimono, you might as well get out here and play a drum!"

Lucy shrugged. "I don't care who sees us," she told him coolly. "I'm not trying to hide anything."

To her surprise he gave in. "Okay, honey," he said softly as they walked along. "Whatever you say goes with me from now on. I'm a reformed character. I haven't taken a drink since the night I got here. I haven't bet a penny on anything in over two months. And I'll keep it up if you'll come away with me, marry me tomorrow. I've got money in the bank now."

Lucy stopped in her tracks. "Where did you get it?"

He couldn't quite look at her. He patted her shoulder. "Why, I saved the most of my pay in Santa Fé. You don't need to worry, Lucy. I give you my word of honor I haven't been gambling again."

"It's true then," the girl said quietly. "You took money for changing the official copy of a bill the legislature passed. These folks here were good to you, Clark. They got you a good job, they gave you a chance —and you sold them out!"

He caught her by the shoulders. "Lucy, how can you think a thing like that of me?"

But his words rang hollow and he seemed to know it. "I can't believe anything else, can I?" she asked quietly, and remembered with a sharp little pang when she had said those same words to another man.

Clark Bowles took a long breath. "No, I guess you can't. Because it's true. I did take a bribe. But Lucy, I wasn't quite as low as you think me. I didn't know that bill had anything to do with the Lucky Diamond. And I wanted the money for you. I thought maybe if I had a thousand dollars again, that you'd go back home with me."

"I never told you I wanted money, did I?"

He sensed the iron in her will, and the contempt in her voice broke him completely.

"Lucy, I'm scared!" Now he sounded like the little boy she had played cops and robbers with when she was seven. "I—I was a fool. A man can always see that after it's too late. He gave me the money—and he was my good friend until after I changed the wording in that law for him. Now he's afraid maybe I'll get drunk some day and tell on him. He's cruel! He's ruthless—and I'm in his way now. And it's just as bad here on the Lucky Diamond. Walt Carmack would kill me on sight for what I did."

Lucy put her hand on his arm. Walt's not like that. Besides, he's away now. You don't need to be afraid of him."

He only shook his head, and she recognized the familiar signs of a stubborness that wouldn't yield to reason.

"Who were you talking about a minute ago, Clark? Who bribed you to change that bill?"

He shivered and looked uneasily over his shoulder. "I couldn't tell you that, Lucy. He'd kill *you* too!"

"Don't be silly! Nobody could hear us out here!"

But he only shook his head in that stubborn, frightened way.

"I've got to go away! Let's go tonight, Lucy. We could be married in Trinidad in the morning!" Then as he saw her start to shake her head: "If you'll come with me, as soon as we're out of the state I'll write a letter—to Walt Carmack, or old Lucky Jim, or anybody else you want. I'll tell them everything."

She looked at him, pitying him for the frightened state he was in, pitying him for his weakness, feeling a strong pull toward him because he needed her.

"I don't love you any more, Clark," she said as gently as she could. "That's all over—for good!"

"Not for good!" he protested fervently. He reached for her again, but she stepped back and he let his hands fall to his sides. "I'll make you love me again, Lucy! I'll do everything you say. I'll never look at

a whiskey bottle or a deck of cards again. I've learned my lesson. I'm ready to—"

What he was ready to do Lucy McAdams never learned, for the next instant there was the sharp crack of a shot from somewhere in the dark mass of low buildings that made up the barns, bunkhouse and gear shed. Lucy screamed.

Clark Bowles gave a strangled little cry and whirled around on one heel. There was surprise in his face for a moment, then as he turned his head toward her, even in the moonlight Lucy could see the terror grow in his eyes.

"I—I'm shot, Lucy!" he gasped. "I—"

Another bullet whistled past their heads, so close that Lucy thought she felt hot wind fan her cheek. Clark Bowles started running, queerly, awkwardly, bent over like an old man, one hand pressed against his side.

Lucy was still terrified, but suddenly her own fear didn't seem important. She ran up alongside and slipped an arm through his.

"Lean on me," she said breathlessly. "Where's your horse?"

She heard a door slam in the big house and a second later sounds in the bunkhouse, and she tried to hurry their pace a little.

Clark Bowles spoke through clenched teeth: "My horse is right ahead. Behind those cottonwoods."

He sagged heavily against the girl, but somehow she kept him on his feet, and running. There were no more shots from behind, and she guessed that the commotion in the bunkhouse had frightened off the would-be killer.

Clark's little Mexican pony snorted windily as they approached him suddenly out of the darkness, but he stood still while Lucy helped the wounded man into the saddle.

She heard boot heels thumping the ground from the direction of the big house, and her hands were shaking with the urgent need for haste as she handed the reins to the man in the saddle, but she held onto the bridle a moment longer.

"Clark, tell me where you'll be! I've got to see you again!"

He was leaning low over the saddle horn, and for what seemed minutes he didn't answer. The footsteps from the house were coming closer. She struck his knee fiercely with her fist.

"Clark, answer me! Hurry!"

He raised his head and looked at her dazedly. "I—I've been hiding—it's an old adobe house—down close to the river—about five miles—southwest!"

"I'll bring you food and medicine! Now hang on!"

She hit the horse smartly on the rump with the palm of her hand. He whirled and shuttled off through the cottonwoods that rimmed the north yard.

Lucy ran back toward the house. It had suddenly occurred to her that one of these men racing toward her might easily be the would-be killer. She had no real coherent thought of what she was doing. She only knew that she must somehow protect Clark Bowles and keep them from following him tonight. Their own footsteps were making so much noise it wasn't likely they would hear the sound of his running horse, and with the long row of double cottonwoods between them and the man ahorseback she didn't think they could see him.

She ran almost straight into the arms of the tall man in the lead before she saw that it was Walt Carmack. She stopped abruptly, her mind spinning dizzily.

"Walt! I didn't know you were back!"

Then suddenly the reaction to the horror of seeing a man shot got to her. Her knees went weak and shaky, and to her own dismay she felt tears streaking down her cheeks. A big sob came from her throat.

Walt Carmack put his arm around her and let her cry against his shoulder. Vaguely she was aware of the murmur of other men's voices around, and after a moment she raised her head.

"What happened, Lucy?" Walt asked, his voice sharply urgent.

Her knees still felt as if they were made of jelly, but her mind was working again. Another stifled sob choked her, and she wiped her eyes on her handkerchief, fighting for an extra moment of time to decide what to tell him.

She couldn't tell him where Clark Bowles' hiding place was, with all these other men listening. Besides it wouldn't do any good to send Walt after him. Clark was afraid

of the tall cowboy, and he'd never tell him anything. She knew suddenly that the task of finding who was behind all the trouble on the Lucky Diamond had fallen on her own slender shoulders.

She looked up at Walt.

"I was restless and couldn't sleep, so I got up and came for a walk. Somebody shot at me. I thought I saw a man on a gray horse out by the corrals. I think he went that way." She pointed vaguely, then realized too late that her story had been a little too glib, too made up. Walt Carmack was looking at her queerly. He turned to the other men.

"Slim, you and Spike get horses and ride the east road—fast. Rusty and Jug take the southeast. I'll take this one." Lucy's heart gave a sudden, frightened thump when he motioned to the road that led past the double line of cottonwoods. Then with relief she remembered that by the time Walt had a horse saddled, Clark would have a good headstart, and even with moonlight it was impossible to see very far.

Millie Harrell's slim, shivering figure appeared in the darkness behind them. She had thrown a light wrap over her nightgown, but the chill night air was cutting around the edges.

"For goodness' sake, w-w-what's g-g-going on out here?" she chattered.

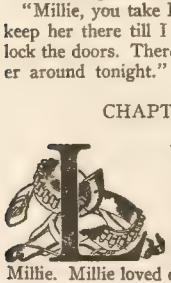
Walt turned to her. "Millie, where's Ford?"

She gave him a blank look. "Why, I don't know. He went to t-t-town this afternoon. S-s-said he might not be back till late. And I g-g-guess he isn't or he'd be out here too."

The other hands had started for the corrals. Walt paused a moment longer.

"Millie, you take Lucy in the house and keep her there till I get back. You better lock the doors. There seems to be a prowler around tonight."

CHAPTER VIII



LUCY was docile enough about the staying indoors until she was sure the men were out of the yards. Then she went to work on Millie. Millie loved excitement herself, and she was dead set against taking any man's orders unless she had to. The only trouble was that Millie wanted to go along.

Lucy adopted her most schoolteacherish, authoritative manner.

"Look, Millie, Clark knows something I've got to find out. And he won't tell anybody but me. He wouldn't even tell *me* if there was anyone else along."

To her surprise the tall girl gave in gracefully. "Okay, honey, it's your show. I won't spoil it for you. But you better take my gun—and for goodness' sake be careful. If anything happens to you, Walt'll take my head off!"

Not more than half an hour after the men had gone, the little foreman's cottage was dark again, Millie was back in bed, and Lucy, with a bundle of food, medicine and bandages tied on behind, was in the saddle heading out the southwest road. She had only the vaguest idea of how to find the adobe house Clark had told her about. Millie could have doubtless given her accurate directions, but much as she loved the ranch girl she couldn't quite trust her with such an important secret. Millie was friendly and talkative. She was perfectly capable of spilling the beans to exactly the wrong person.

Lucy followed the road for about a mile until she remembered that Walt Carmack had come this way a little while earlier. Anyhow, the road wouldn't take her all the way to the abandoned adobe shack where Clark was hiding. So she cut across the open toward the river. If she followed the river downstream, sooner or later she would come to the cabin.

It sounded simple, but she found that there were little Mexican farms scattered along the river with many fences and barbed-wire gates. A half-dozen times, warned by the barking of dogs that some place was inhabited, she had to make a wide detour. Several times she thought she heard hoofbeats behind her, but when she stopped to listen she could hear nothing but the heavy breathing of her own horse. Here, with cornfields patching the river bottoms, big old cottonwoods shading the farm yards, and Lucky Diamond Herefords grazing on the open range outside the fences, she couldn't tell whether any of the shadowy

figures in the distance might be a man on horseback or not.

It frightened her and almost made her turn back to think that she might be leading the killer straight to Clark Bowles. But Clark was wounded. Badly, she thought. He'd need food and medicine and somebody to look after him. And if he should die off here by himself nobody might ever know who had killed Billy Gamel, who had bribed Clark to change the school lands bill, or who had fired the shot at him out of the darkness tonight.

She glanced worriedly at the moon. In another hour it would be dawn, and then it would be still another hour until daylight. She kicked her horse into a lope. She could never find the right place without moonlight, and she didn't want to give Clark away by stopping at any of these other houses to ask.

Then suddenly as she rounded a little knoll she saw the flat-topped adobe hut nestled in a little hollow, closer to the river than any of the other farm houses had been. As she crossed the yard and her horse's hoofs kicked up bits of driftwood and flood-water rubble, she knew why the house had been abandoned.

A saddled horse, left in the yard with his reins dragging, nickered to her anxiously.

She sat for a moment, looking about her warily before she dismounted. At the top of the gradual rise of the river bank beyond the house she could see the faint shadows of several white-faced cattle. They seemed to be grazing undisturbed. Otherwise there was no movement anywhere.

She slipped off her horse by the front door. It was open, but for a moment her eyes, accustomed to the moonlight outside, could see nothing but blackness through the doorway.

"Clark!" she called softly.

There was no answer. Only a rustling sound that might have been a rat, or the stirring of a body.

She thought again then, for a moment, that she heard the distant sound of horse's steps approaching, but when she turned her head and listened, she decided it was only the heavy pounding of her own heart.

She flicked on her flashlight, splayed a stream of light through the doorway, then circled it around the room. She held it a moment on the tumbled heap of clothes, blankets and corn shucks that had been serving as a bed, saw that he was not there, then brought the light on around.

He was lying on the bare floor, close to the wall just to the side of the door, not a yard from where the girl stood. Apparently he had fallen there and been too weak or too sick to crawl over to the bed.

His eyes were open, following the light with a wild, frightened, sick look in them.

LUCKY JIM

He suddenly flung an arm up over his eyes, and groaned. "Oh, God! Don't—"

"Clark!" the girl said softly. "Don't be afraid. It's Lucy."

He slid the arm warily half off his eyes as if he couldn't believe her. "Lucy?"

"Yes. I've brought you some food and medicine. I'll stay with you and take care of you until you're able to ride again."

"I didn't think you'd come. I didn't think you cared enough—any more." She knelt beside him and he reached out and caught her hand. "I was laying here thinking I was going to die. And I was lonesome—and afraid. I'm glad you came, Lucy."

At the lost, forlorn tone in his voice Lucy wanted to put her head down and cry. Cry for the far-away days when this boy had been all the world to her. Now she had grown up and away from him and he was still a wilful little boy, sick and lost and afraid.

She rubbed cool fingers gently over his

forehead. "Don't be afraid," she said again. "You're not alone any more."

Then as she said that, she heard her horse nicker softly. Through the open doorway she saw him put up his head and look at the rise behind the house.

Her heart turned cold within her, while her fingers continued their soothing motion on his hot head. So she had led the killer to him after all!

Clark had heard the horse too. He tried to raise his head to look through the door. "Someone coming, Lucy?"

With a pang of pity and maybe a little of shame she heard the terror in his voice. She patted his shoulder reassuringly.

"Maybe," she said sturdily. "But don't worry. I have a gun. It's dark in here and light outside. I won't let them hurt you."

She heard the sound of stealthy footsteps on the rocky rubble outside and reached for her gun. It took her a long moment to get it out of the holster, for she was both unaccustomed to and deathly afraid of it. She crawled over to the side of the door on her hands and knees and waited.

It never occurred to her at that moment to marvel that the girl crouching here in the dark of an old, abandoned hut, waiting to kill if need be an unknown enemy, was the same girl as the cool and superior Lucy McAdams who had come West three months ago hating all violence and rough living.

She heard coarse gravel grind together as the man at the other corner of the house shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Her gun was up now, the hammer back, her finger steady on the trigger.

"I've got you covered," she said calmly. Of course she hadn't, but in the stories she'd read that's what they always said. "Come out from behind the corner of the house or I'll let you have it."

The noise that she heard then sounded suspiciously like a chuckle.

"Lucy?" It was Walt Carmack's voice.

Clark Bowles gave a little smothered cry of fear and tried to struggle to his feet, only to sprawl headlong on the floor again. Lucy let her gun arm drop as the cowboy came around the corner of the house.

"Oh, Walt!" Her cry was both a protest and an accusation. "Why did you follow me here?"

"Is it Clark Bowles in here with you?"

She hesitated, then knew it was useless to lie. "Yes. He's bad hurt, Walt."

"I'll get our saddle blankets and string them over the windows. Then we'll have a light an' look at him."

At his matter-of-fact voice some of the strain eased out of the girl's taut muscles. Now that he was here, there was relief and a feeling of security in his solid presence.

By the aid of her flashlight Lucy found a couple of candle remnants and lighted them. Clark Bowles seemed to have fainted.

They plumped up his corn shuck bed, straightened the only blanket on it, then Walt carried the wounded man over and laid him on it. Lucy watched while the cowboy cut off the blood-soaked shirt and examined the wound.

"How bad is it?" she asked anxiously.

Walt Carmack looked at her and shook his head. "It looks ugly to me," he said. "But I don't know much about such things. We'll do what we can for him tonight. In the morning you can go for Doc Watson and a buckboard. I'll stay here with him."

"You mean you're really going to turn him in, then?"

Walt looked at her in astonishment.

"Why, of course," he said. Then as he saw stubbornness grow in her eyes, he added more persuasively, "Don't you see that it's the only thing to do, Lucy? Hurt like he is, we can't keep him hidden here long. He's got neighbors within a mile on two sides. It's a wonder they haven't seen him and told about it before this. We've got to get him to tell us who's after him. Then we'll take him to the hospital and keep him under guard until this is settled. It's the only thing I can do."

The girl looked down at the unconscious man. He was breathing with a harsh, rasping sound in his throat, and when she touched his forehead it felt hot and feverish.

Taking him to town probably meant a prison sentence for him. He deserved it of course, but she kept remembering how when he was a kid he'd always wanted to play the cop—the tough, hard-boiled cop who always got his man. And now the tables were turned.

She met Walt Carmack's eyes. "You're right, of course."

The cowboy reached a hand to her across the body of the wounded man.

"I told you once that you weren't very loyal to your friends. I'd like to take that back."

Lucy felt hot tears spring to her eyes. "You—you love him, don't you?" Walt asked her gently.

She raised her eyes to meet his. "In a way—I guess I'll always love him," she said slowly.

"What way, Lucy?" Walt insisted gently. The girl flushed and tried to draw her hand away, but his fingers tightened and held it.

"We were going to be married."

"Were? Not *are*, Lucy?"

She shook her head.

"I knew he was drinking and gambling a lot, but I thought maybe he'd change after we were married. Then my father gave us a thousand dollars to buy furniture. Clark got into a poker game one night and lost it all. Somehow that was the last straw. I didn't want to marry a man I'd always have to be ashamed of—to make excuses for. I broke the engagement and came West. You know the rest."

"No wonder you didn't like my foolin' an' bettin' an' teasin'!" Walt Carmack said softly. "I've been a heel, Lucy. Shall we start over and be friends?"

She nodded. "I'd like that."

When the cowboy got up to start a fire in the rusty old iron stove in one corner of the room, she asked him: "You've been to Mexico, Walt?"

"Yes."

"Did you find your grandfather?"

He shook his head.

"He never got to the ranch down there at all. He disappeared off the train somewhere between Juarez and Guzman. I couldn't find a trace of him. But I somehow don't believe he's dead. I decided I'd try working from this end a while. Clark can tell me who's back of all this—if we can get him conscious for a few minutes."

"You know eight sections of the ranch are being sold at public auction next Saturday?"

He nodded.

"I've been keepin' track of the time all right. But that didn't seem as important as findin' Lucky Jim. Besides, there ain't nothin' I can do about that. Or if there is, I ain't thought of it yet. I've got no way of gettin' at any of my grandfather's money. My mother and I between us could raise maybe a couple thousand dollars—which wouldn't be anywhere near enough. Whoever wants that land bad enough to kill for it will be biddin' high!"

As they talked neither of them had noticed that a corner of one of the saddle blankets had slipped off the window. Walt set a bucket of river water on the rickety stove to heat, while Lucy laid out the medicine kit she had brought with her.

There was one great triangular chunk broken out of the window-pane. Lucy turned just in time to see the ugly snout of a sixgun poked through it, and behind it, pressed close to the window, the masked face of a man.

She dropped to her hands and knees and yelled at the cowboy. "Walt! Look out! The window!"

The sixgun spoke and Walt Carmack whirled, his own pistol clearing leather as he turned.

But already the face at the window was gone. The cowboy took one look at the man on the bed and knew when he saw the round red splotch on his temple, that there was nothing anybody could ever do now for Clark Bowles.

He looked at the girl. "You afraid to stay here by yourself?"

She was, but she was too proud to admit it. She swallowed once.

"No, I—I have my gun."

"Good girl! Blow out the light and guard the door like you did before I came. I won't be gone but a few minutes if I don't get on his trail. There's no danger!"

Outside a big, yellow ball of a moon seemed to be resting on the western horizon. In a few minutes it would be gone, but there was still light enough to see the rump of a tall grayish horse going up the rise back of the house.

Walt swung into the saddle and gave his bay the spurs. The bay was one of the strongest and fastest in the Lucky Diamond string, but the horse ahead was fast too. For what seemed to Walt long minutes he kept the distance between them even. The

cowboy threw a glance over his shoulder at the moon. It was halfway down now.

The man on the gray was far enough ahead that he could easily give Walt the slip once it was dark. If Walt were going to catch him he would have to do it quick.

Walt dug his spurs in a little deeper, leaned low in the saddle and brought the end of his lariat down sharply over the horse's rump. The bay seemed to have been saving an extra little spurt of speed. He stretched his neck and gave it now.

For another moment the distance between the horses seemed to hold, then gradually it lessened. The man ahead tossed a quick shot behind, from under his arm. Walt kept on coming.

But now the light was beginning to dim. Walt estimated the distance between the two horses and judged that he was within sixgun range. Suddenly he yanked the bay to a sliding stop, jumped from the saddle, took a second for a careful aim, and pulled the trigger.

The gray stumbled, went down on one knee. The rider catapulted over his neck, to manage somehow to light squatting, on his feet.

The gray horse was back on his feet the next instant. Walt held his next shot, waiting for the man to show behind the snorting, lunging horse. Instead of trying to remount, the cowboy saw that the man was headed on a dead run for a cornpatch not more than a dozen steps to his right.

Walt fired again, and saw the man duck lower as he ran. The cowboy swore and pulled his sight down a fraction, but this time when he pulled the trigger it was only at a dim swaying motion within the black leafy shadow of a patch of head-high Mexican corn.

A bullet suddenly whistled past Walt's ear. Instinctively he dodged, then dived for the field himself. Another bullet blood-branded the skin of his left arm. Then by stooping a little, he was within the rustling black shelter himself.

The long green ribbons of sharp-edged corn leaves cut at his face like whips as he ran, but he was scarcely aware of the sting. Another bullet cut a cornstalk above his head, and he stopped abruptly.

He took a long breath and listened. Ahead and off to the right he heard the man crashing through the corn. Walt fired at the sound. The noise stopped—so abruptly that for a long, tense moment he wondered if he had been lucky enough to score a hit. He took a cartridge out of his belt and tossed it a dozen feet to the right. Instantly a shot answered the rustling thud it made.

"Checkmate!" he thought. He eased back on his heels and settled down to a long wait. He swore and then grinned to himself in the darkness. It wouldn't be long until dawn. And when it was light enough to see through the corn this business would be finished—one way or the other.

But presently a breeze rustled through the corn loud enough to drown out any noise of movement. Walt dropped to all fours and started crawling slowly between two rows. Then suddenly somewhere too near for comfort there rose the heart-chilling whir-r-r of a rattler. With the instinctive reaction of a man born and raised in rattlesnake country, Walt Carmack made a wide, high jump to one side.

Instantly from out of the blackness ahead of him a sixgun blazed. A sudden, searing pain tore through the cowboy's leg as the force of the bullet spun him to the ground. A cornstalk somehow jarred his .45 out of his hand as he fell. In the few precious seconds he spent feeling frantically for it, he heard the man crashing off through the corn away from him. When he found the gun again it was too late to shoot, and he knew it.

He lay still for a moment, silently cursing his own bad luck, and the pain in his knee. Then he remembered Lucy McAdams crouching alone and frightened in a dark, abandoned cabin with a dead man for company. The cabin was close enough so that she would undoubtedly have heard the shots and be frantic with fear and worry. He must somehow manage to get back to her.

He tried to get to his feet, but the knee gave way with him, and he fell again. Involuntarily, and because he thought he was alone where no one could hear, he groaned with the sheer, agonizing pain of it.

A soft voice called to him from the edge of the corn behind him. "Walt?"

He sat up, disbelieving his ears. "Lucy! My gosh, girl! What are you doing here?"

"Following you, of course!"

He heard her sob a little then as she came running through the corn toward him, and the note of exquisite relief in her voice was music to his ears.

CHAPTER IX

WALT CARMACK looked sourly at the leg stretched out in front of him on the hassock and swathed in layer upon layer of bandage gauze and splints, then at the pair of crutches propped by the side of his chair.

Tonight he was not feeling very well pleased with himself. He had done the best he could and been outwitted at every turn. Day after tomorrow eight separate sections, nearly all of them right in the heart of Lucky Diamond range, would be sold at public auction. It would ruin the ranch, but there was nothing he could do to stop the sale. The law was clear enough on that score.

He hadn't money enough himself to buy them in for Lucky Jim—if indeed his grandfather was still alive. He didn't even have anything he could offer as security to borrow the money.

And while he might be morally certain that the man who would be bidding on that land Saturday morning was the same man who had killed Billy Gamel and first bribed and then killed Clark Bowles, he couldn't actually produce any convincing proof of that either. Certainly not the kind of proof that talks to a jury.

His mother stopped by the open doorway. "Ford wants to talk to you a minute, son."

The stocky foreman came into the room. Walt turned his head and motioned to a chair near the fireplace.

"Sit down, Ford."

The foreman looked at the cowboy with eyes as full of cold dislike as ever. He sat down uncomfortably on the edge of a straight chair. "If I was sure Lucky Jim was dead an' this ranch was yours, I wouldn't give a damn what happens to it," he began bluntly.

Walt grunted. "Did you come over here to tell me that?" he asked.

"Not exactly. I just wanted to set you straight to begin with—that's all." He sat back a little firmer in his chair. "But I ain't sure Lucky Jim's dead an' he's been a mighty good friend to me. I've got a little money saved—not a lot, just a few thousand dollars. Enough to bid in that piece of land that holds the Ojo Feliz spring he's always set so much store by. Maybe if that don't come too high, another section too. An' Slim Reynolds has got some money saved. He figgers on bidding on the Clearwater Springs piece. If Lucky Jim comes back he can have it for just what we pay for it."

Walt was looking at him steadily. "An' if Lucky don't come back?" he asked.

Ford Harrell met his eyes unflinchingly. "If Lucky don't come back I know I'm out on my ear anyhow. I figger Ojo Feliz will make just as good a place to start up a little spread of my own as any place. I ain't heard Slim express himself on that score."

Walt studied the man who had never made any bones about hating his guts. His mind was going in circles again. Since the very first his suspicions had seesawed back and forth between two men. Ford Harrell had been absent from the ranch last night when Clark Bowles was shot. There were still those four unexplained hours between the time he should have arrived in Oxville and the time his train left for Santa Fé, the afternoon Billy Gamel was shot.

Now Ford Harrell was planning to buy the Ojo Feliz land, Slim Reynolds the Clearwater Springs area. For the first time Walt began to see that the auction might not even tell him anything. Perhaps there would be a half-dozen different bidders for a half-dozen different sections. Was it one particular section the killer wanted? And if so why? Could there be oil or valuable minerals on one of these plots of land? Or was the killer planning to bid in the whole works, hoping to cut up the Lucky Diamond range so that old Lucky Jim would eventually be forced to sell him all of it?

He stood up on his good leg and tucked his crutches under his arms.

"Thanks for telling me, Ford," he said, with an effort keeping his voice cool. "Will you have one of the boys saddle a horse for me? You've given me an idea, anyhow!"

In the saddle almost constantly the next twenty-four hours, Walt Carmack was repaid for the almost constant pain in his wounded leg by learning, as he had never fully realized it before, the value of friendship and the importance in the range country of a reputation for honesty and fair dealing.

Stopping alike at humble homestead shacks and big ranch spreads, he found them all ready to lend the last cent of their savings to help old Lucky Jim Sanderson out of a jam—from the poor nester on the Rio Fritos who took a dollar and twenty cents out of an old baking powder can and offered it to him, to old Johann Christersen, who had the reputation of being so tight he squeaked when he walked, but who never batted an eyelash at pledging ten thousand dollars to save the Lucky Diamond Ranch of his neighbor.

Walt wrote them all down in a little black notebook and by the time he turned into his own front yard a little after midnight Friday, he had something over fifty thousand dollars pledged, with the chance of another fifteen or twenty thousand coming from the letters he had written to ranchers who lived too far away to reach in one day's horseback circuit. It should be enough. At least it was, he thought, more than the land was actually worth—and probably all Lucky Jim could afford to pay.

Late as it was, there was still a light in Ford Harrell's cottage. The piano was going and he stopped a minute to listen to Millie Harrell's sweet, true soprano. Out by the bunkhouse a dog barked insistently until Walt was close enough to speak to him.

He unsaddled his horse and as he turned him into the corral he heard the kitchen door of the cottage open and then close. A girl in a white dress came hurrying across the yard toward him.

"Walt?" It was Lucy McAdams' voice, soft yet with a strong undercurrent of excitement in it.

"What is it, Lucy?"

"Come in the house with me. I've something to show you."

With any other girl he might have been a little impatient. He was tired, and the broken bone in his leg ached abominably from the punishment of long hours in the saddle, but he had realized for some time now that when this girl wanted anything of him she would get it one way or another. He followed her obediently.

At the kitchen door she stopped for a moment.

"You've got your gun loaded?" He nodded, and she added. "I made Ford and Millie stay up. I hoped you'd be home before long."

More mystified than ever, Walt followed her across the kitchen. Millie Harrell was singing again now, but she stopped when the living-room door opened and she heard the click of Walt's crutches in the doorway.

The broad-shouldered man sitting beside her on the piano bench turned his head. Then, with a slowly whitening face, he stood up. Walt Carmack swore half under his breath in sudden surprise, then very deliberately stood his right crutch against the wall so that his right arm hung handy to his gun.

For a long moment he and Gene Chipman stared at each other across the width of the room, and for once the handsome banker's poise was considerably shaken.

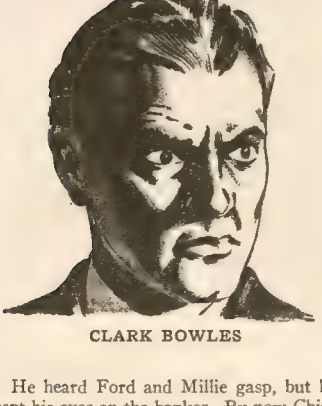
Ford and Millie Harrell looked from one to the other in blank astonishment.

"It looks like you and me have been runnin' through the same cornpatch, Gene," Walt said quietly. "I sorta suspected you all the time, but that talk of yours about not ever bein' able to ride a horse had me fooled."

Gene Chipman swallowed once, then shrugged. "I haven't any idea what you're talking about," he said coolly. "I haven't been on a horse in twenty years."

Walt's smile was grim. He touched his own face that was crisscrossed with a score of thin, skin-deep scratches. On Gene Chipman's cheeks and forehead the pattern was different, but it looked as if the same instrument had carved a spider-web of clean, fine cuts.

"I got these scratches runnin' through green corn the other night," Walt explained patiently, more for Ford Harrell's benefit than any other reason. "I was chasin' a murderer, but he got away—then!"



CLARK BOWLES

He heard Ford and Millie gasp, but he kept his eyes on the banker. By now Chipman had himself in hand again. He smiled and shrugged with bland self-assurance.

"I still haven't any idea what you're talking about. But if you mean how did I get my face scratched, I was foolish enough to rescue a stray cat from a dog. She cut me up a little doing it."

"Well, by God," Ford Harrell said slowly. "You *was* foolish, wasn't you?"

Chipman looked at him. Two spots of angry color appeared suddenly in his cheeks, and his eyes narrowed.

"It's Walt's word against mine, Harrell!" he said sharply.

"Not quite," Lucy McAdams put in sweetly. "I had on a hat and I didn't run fast and I kept my head down so the corn didn't whip my face—but look here!" She loosened her high Peter Pan collar and turned her head from side to side, showing a few of the scratches on either side of her neck. "You didn't know I was there, did you, Gene? So you see it isn't just *your* word against Walt's!"

The banker looked slowly around the room. He saw condemnation and loathing in every face, and he would have been a fool not to know the jig was up.

He made a sudden grab for Millie Harrell who was still standing close to him, with the obvious intention of using her body as a shield to make his getaway. But the ranch girl was strong and agile as a cat. She spun away out of reach before his fingers had hardly touched her, and then suddenly shoved the piano bench straight at his knees.

Chipman stumbled and half fell. The next instant the ominous buzz of a rattlesnake filled the room. Both girls yelled and jumped for the nearest chair. Ford Harrell made a grotesque leap sideways.

Walt Carmack was the only one who didn't seem to be startled. His gun cleared its holster with one lightning swift movement that was in itself like the deadly strike of a rattler. He pulled the trigger and the pearl-handled .38 jumped sideways out of Gene Chipman's hand to fall clattering.

The banker grunted with pain. As he grasped at his half paralyzed wrist, a small object dropped from his other hand to the floor. Walt picked it up. It was a little tin buzzer not unlike one of those noise-maker gadgets at a carnival. The noise it made even in Walt's unpracticed fingers was astonishingly like the warning buzz of a diamondback.

"You fooled me twice with this thing an' purt near got me killed," he said calmly. "You didn't think it would work again, did you?"

Ford Harrell stopped looking for snakes and a half sheepish expression came over his face.

Chipman looked at Walt, still surprisingly self-contained. "I should have taken time to go back and kill you last night when I had the chance," he said thoughtfully.

Walt could agree that, at least from the banker's point of view that statement was probably correct. Then, remembering Billy Gamel and Clark Bowles, he clenched his fists at his sides to think that it was all over so easily and quickly.

"I wish you'd get up on your feet an' fight. I've got a busted knee and you a broken wrist—I hope. It ought to be fairly even."

"Cut it out, Walt!" Ford Harrell broke in quietly. "You've had your fun and done a damn good job of it, too." He turned to Chipman. "You're a hooked rooster, anyhow, Gene. So you just as well tell us how you had Lucky Jim done away with in Mexico. If he ain't alive, by God, I'll—"

"He's alive!" Chipman said that much quickly, then hesitated, as if trying to decide

whether to play his exclusive knowledge of Lucky Jim Sanderson's whereabouts as a last trump card in his own defense. Then, to everybody's surprise, he chucked it.

"Lucky Jim is a guest of some friends of mine in Chihuahua. You'll find the address in my notebook on my desk at home. I could have easily had him killed, but—well, dammit, I always sort of liked the old cuss. He could have saved us all a lot of bother, though, if he'd sold me the Lucky Diamond when I made him an offer."

Ford Harrell made a sudden gagging sound as if he were sick at his stomach. "Millie, run get me that rope hangin' just outside the kitchen door. I've had about all of this I can stand."

When they had Chipman securely trussed up and waiting for the sheriff to come after him, Walt turned to Ford Harrell.

"Ford, before we wind up this evenin's business, there's one thing I'd like to ask you. Where in the devil have you been on these long trips away from the ranch?"

For the first time since he had known him, Walt saw Ford Harrell acutely embarrassed. He turned red and looked uncomfortably at his daughter.

"You should have asked *me*, Walt," Millie said serenely. "It's a woman, isn't it, Dad? A pretty, red-headed widow named Mela Andrews who lives in Oxville."

Harrell sputtered, then began to get mad at his own embarrassment.

"You been spyin' on me, Millie? Anyhow, I wasn't goin' to marry her now, so you got no call to get mad about it."

"Phooey!" said Millie inelegantly. "I didn't think those pink letters you've been getting lately were bills for whiskey! I'd have headed it off all right if I hadn't found out how nice she is." She paused a moment and a smile came into her eyes. "I might let you marry her, Dad—if you'll let me go to Denver and study music."

"A nice red-headed wife might sweeten up the disposition of even an ol' cocklebur like you, Ford," Walt said dryly.

Ford Harrell looked at him and Walt surprised a twinkle in his usually cold eyes.

"Why," he thought to himself, "the old booger's human after all. Maybe if I live to be a hundred I might get so I sorta like him."

IT WAS late in the afternoon a week later when a buckboard drove up into the front yard. A silvery-haired old man, thin and weak from a month's captivity in Mexico, stepped shakily to the ground.

Walt Carmack went with him up the front steps, where Mrs. Carmack's capable hands took charge. The cowboy looked over toward the foreman's cottage. Lucy McAdams came out on the porch and waved.

It was like throwing down a bag of oats in front of a hungry cowpony. Obeying his heart, Walt Carmack's feet carried him across the yard toward her—fast.

"Hello, Lucy."

"Hello, Walt."

After a moment she came over and sat down beside him. "Walt, I—I think we've still got a lot to say to each other. A lot of things to straighten out."

He smiled down at her. "We've got a lifetime to do it in," he said.

She drew back a little before the look in his eyes. "No, some of it's got to be said now. I've got to tell you how sorry I am—for something I said to you once!"

"Sorry you said it? Or sorry you believed it?"

The teasing look was back in his eyes.

"Both," she said steadily. "Sorry that I ever for one moment believed such a thing of you! And sorrier that I said it!"

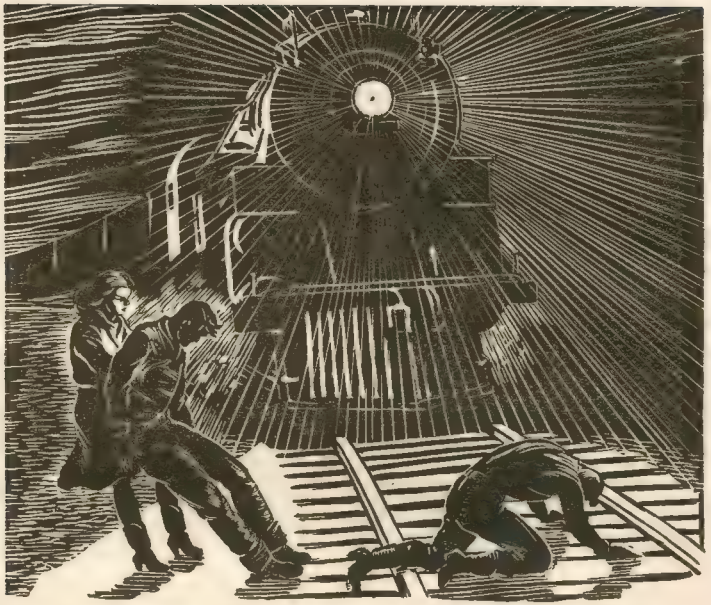
Suddenly his arms were around her.

"Honey," he said softly in her ear, "you told me that a dozen times already. The morning you brought the newspaper to me—instead of Ford Harrell or somebody else—every time you turned to me for help. And you even hinted you liked me a little when you followed me through a hail of bullets into a cornpatch."

Lucy gave a long sigh of pure happiness. "A little!" she protested in mock indignation. "Walt—what *are* you doing?"

"Fixin' to draw straws," he teased. "Short straw rates a kiss. Long straw, you go in the house!"

Lucy McAdams had no intention of going into the house. Her fingers trembled a little, reaching for one of the broken match sticks he held out to her, his other arm already around her. But not for fear she would draw the long straw. Walt, she remembered, knew how to fix them.



A Day of Reckoning

By Dorothy L. Bonar

When a man loves a woman as Tracy loved Ruth, should he keep on believing in her no matter how black the evidence of her deception?

IT WAS early morning, the hour at which they usually had breakfast. Familiar with their habits, Tracy Holt dismounted a good distance below the ranchyard. Leaving his pack and saddle horse concealed in the willows bordering a noisy creek, he worked his way to a position directly opposite the house.

Inside the small yard flowers nodded colorful heads. Crisp white curtains fluttered at an opened window. But there was no one about. Tracy stood a moment, rock-grey eyes absorbing the scene, a tall, superbly shouldered man in his late twenties, powdered from sombrero to boot with the dust of a long trail.

Satisfied at length, he crossed the intervening space in a dozen strides. There was a six-shooter in his hand when he stepped upon the veranda. He entered without knocking, halted just inside the door.

A fragrance of boiled coffee lingered still in the kitchen, but on the table dishes

for two had been scraped and neatly stacked. He had miscalculated. Hal Davies had already eaten and gone. Ruth was here alone, busy in the next room. Warned by the sound of his entrance, she would appear in a moment. . . .

She did. She stopped short at sight of him, her eyes going wide. She took a step in his direction, caught herself and shrank against the side of the door-jamb, every line of her slender figure rigid beneath a blue calico gown.

"Tracy!" she whispered.

The low music of her voice sent a quiver through the frame of the man menacing her. The barrel of the gun gripped in a lean brown hand sagged slightly.

He had been a fool to imagine he could ever harm this girl, Tracy Holt reflected with sudden bitterness. Facing her now, he found it hard to believe that she had jilted him, run away with the man who would soon have been his partner and taken along the entire proceeds of the sale of his Lazy H herd. He could not deal with her as he meant to deal with Davies, for she possessed still the charm that had enslaved him.

Brown hair fluffed about her head in shining waves. Her nose was adorably short, her eyes the deep blue of a mountain lake. They met his without evasion, despite the fear holding them wide.

Sight of her served only to drive home once more his sense of unbearable loss, to fan to a new heat his hatred of the man responsible for it.

"Where is he?" he demanded harshly.

The girl straightened her shoulders. "There's no reason for you to fight with Hal," she said quietly. "If you've got to take your spite out on someone, let it be me. It was my idea to run away with the money, not his!"

Tracy was staggered. Whatever he had prepared himself for during the weeks it had taken to track down these runaways, it was certainly nothing so brazen as this. As he struggled to throw off shock, Ruth spoke again, pleadingly.

"Can't you be generous, Tracy? I know it must have been a terrible blow. But if you'd stop to think—"

"I'd forget you were a woman and kill you, too!" interrupted Tracy in a gust of passion. With an effort he recovered self-control, repeated evenly, "Where is he?"

Silence stretched between them for one long moment. Then, "I won't tell you!" answered the girl. "You—"

A step on the veranda silenced her lips. Tracy started, whirled. But the girl had held his attention a moment too long. Before he could so much as snap a shot in the direction of the newcomer, a report rang out. Lead bored hotly through his upper right arm. His gun clattered to the floor and his hand dropped with it, fingers abruptly red and dripping.

"Move back!" ordered Hal Davies. He picked up Tracy's gun after the latter had obeyed slowly, his retreat into the room marked by a trail of dark, shiny drops.

With a little sob Ruth tore her eyes from them, flew to meet her rescuer. He put a comforting arm about her shoulders, but his brown gaze held that of the other man.

"I came out of the barn just in time to see you go into the house," he explained. "Thought it looked like you." Unexpectedly he added, "I'm sorry I had to wing you, Tracy. But you looked plumb dangerous, and I couldn't take a chance."

He was about Tracy's own age and of an equal height. He wore a white Stetson shoved back on curly hair. And there was no suggestion whatever of guilt in his look.

It was like a slap in the face to Tracy, this fact that, although Ruth had acknowledged their transgression, both should continue to face him, proud and unrepentant. He said tightly,

"You won't talk your way out of this, Davies! Better finish me now while you've got the chance. You'll never get another!"

A look that was almost repugnance flitted over the redhead's face. "What's the use of going on like that, Tracy?" he demanded conciliatingly. "This thing can be patched up now that you're here, can't it?"

Derision twisted Tracy's mouth. "I knew you'd try to squirm out of it as soon as I caught up with you!" answered he bitingly. "Well, squirm and be damned! There's a day of reckoning coming to you

two. As sure as I walk out of here, you're going to get it!"

Steadily the blood had continued to run down his arm. Unless it were checked soon he would find himself growing weak. Realizing this Tracy turned away, ignored the gun leveled at him and stalked toward the door.

"But Tracy!" protested Davies, only to be interrupted by the girl.

"Let him go, Hal," she directed, her voice cold with contempt. "It's not in him to be reasonable or generous. It's not me he cares about anyway, or the money. It's the fact that somebody dared to cross him, dared to go against the will of the great Spane!"

Tracy halted on the threshold as though a bullet from Hal's gun had, indeed, penetrated his back. For a moment he stood there, balls of muscle quivering in each cheek with the setting of his jaw. Then he looked around at the man.

"So you told her that after all, did you?" he said slowly, with terrible import. "Another thing to remember."

Davies made no answer. Without another glance at the girl standing in the circle of Davies' arm, Tracy turned away. The strides that took him back to his horses were steady, even though they left behind a trail of drops that glistened in the sun.

SPANE! Down the corridor of memory the name echoed as Tracy moved along a brush-choked draw on his way to the Big Horn River. It had started as a lark ten years ago, a wild adventure for a pair of eighteen-year-old kids, footloose and toying with liquor. Scarcely realizing how it had come about, he and Bob Crane had found themselves riding with a band of outlaws. Two jobs and, disgusted with the bloodshed in which neither would take part, Tracy had brought dissension into the gang by labeling such unnecessary. So well had he argued that, although half the company had chosen to remain with the old leader, Lawton, the other half had clamored for a new one.

Out of this was born the outlaw, Spane. Deadly in gunplay, still he had gone on to prove his point. Through cleverness and careful planning his jobs became conspicuous for their absence of killings. Yet so consistently did he make monkeys of lawmen that two swore publicly to get him or run him out of their jurisdictions.

In the face of such a challenge Tracy found it impossible to quit the game, despite his friend's continual pleading that they do so. Then had come the inevitable wind-up. Mysteriously, plans had leaked out. They had ridden one night into a trap out of which only he and Bob, the latter desperately wounded, had escaped.

Holed up in hills alive with posses, Tracy had fought vainly for his friend's life. Dying, Bob's last wish had been for the outlaw, Spane, to die with him. His argument was sound.

"It's only stubbornness and pride—makin' you keep on!" he'd panted. "They'll raise hell in your life—some day. Your face ain't known—but to one or two. Go somewhere else—go straight; Promise, pard?"

Bowed down with grief and remorse, Tracy had given his word and kept it. Spane had simply disappeared. Through five lonely years Tracy Holt had labored to build up his Flying H. Not even the appearance of his rival outlaw leader, Lawton, buying up a neighboring spread, had daunted him. Lawton had approached him once with a proposition that revealed he had not wholly reformed. Tracy had declined it, and there matters rested when Ruth and Hal Davies entered his life.

They were seeking a ranch in which to invest a legacy, and the Flying H had taken their fancy. Unwilling though Tracy was to relinquish his holdings, he had been glad to consider selling a half-interest after one look into Ruth's blue eyes. Brother and sister, they called themselves. But Hal's folks had merely raised Ruth and they were no blood relation. Brother and sister!

Tracy laughed harshly as he emerged from the draw and found flowing water before him. At this point the river was wide, a calm surface hiding the true swiftness of its current. Tracy dropped halter rope and bridle reins in order that both

animals might drink, dismounted to squat at the water's edge.

The bleeding of his wound had almost stopped. A bit dizzy, he bathed his face and drank deeply before examining his hurt. It was a clean hole through muscle and flesh, so that he lost no time bandaging it with pieces of an extra shirt and fashioning a sling.

As he was about to mount the absence of a weight at his right hip forced itself into his attention. His hesitation was brief. Again he went to his warbag, this time producing a pair of six-shooters.

Of dark blue steel, loaded and in perfect condition, they were beautiful weapons. In the butt of each shone the letter S, inlaid with pearl. Spane's guns, the only material evidence linking him to his past; he had kept them because they were a gift from the friend he had lost. Other than himself, only Hal Davies knew of them. Knew because he, in his stupidity, had told his every secret to Ruth's brother, feeling that only through making a clean breast of things could he make himself worthy of Ruth's love.

Hal had assured him it would make no difference to Ruth, but declared she would probably be happier to know nothing about it. He had advised Tracy to hold his tongue. On the matter of Lawton, however, he had looked thoughtful.

"Maybe it'd be a good idea to start out together in a new location," he said slowly. "You're selling off your herd of mixed stock. Why not sell the ranch, too? Altogether it should bring close to what I've got. With $40,000 we could get the good stock you want, even some blooded horses. Nobody could possibly know you up in Wyoming, and there's a place up there that Ruth and I almost bought."

But loath to be driven, Tracy had retorted flatly, "Nothing doing! Lawton can't hurt me. To hell with him."

And though Davies had tried again and again to re-open the subject, he had refused to listen, blithely continuing to whip Flying H affairs into shape, for on the day that the partnership papers were signed, Ruth was to become Mrs. Holt.

He'd sold his cattle. Because there was no bank in Cholla he'd fetched the cash home, pridefully and fatuously revealing its hiding place to his bride-to-be before riding back to town to purchase the sort of outfit he figured a man should be married in. He'd returned that night to a house denuded of Ruth's bright presence, all the Davies' belongings, and the money.

No one had seen them go except Lawton, who had come along and found Tracy outside his gate, feverishly trying to pick up the tracks of the pretty buckskin pony that had been his first present to Ruth.

"Missin' somethin'?" inquired Lawton with a smirk.

He was a big man, thick-bodied, thick-featured, with green eyes that squinted habitually beneath a low forehead draped with a matt of kinky yellow hair.

When Tracy made no reply he added, "They left his mornin'. Had their luggage loaded on a pack horse. I seen 'em when they cut across my pasture headin' for Ramirez. Likely they caught that afternoon train for parts unknown."

For minutes he took in Tracy's white silence, then remarked with spiteful enjoyment, "It took a woman to outsmart the great Spane, didn't it?" Guffawing hugely, he rode on.

In that moment Tracy realized that Lawton still held a grudge against him for that long ago splitting up of his gang. But it wasn't important. He was too crushed by the fact that Ruth was gone, that through his love for her he had been robbed and betrayed, his life desolated.

Standing now with one of Spane's guns gripped in his left hand, the pain of this new wound had nothing to do with the whiteness that appeared about Tracy's mouth. Ruth had made it plain that she considered him an outlaw. That was why she had faced him so boldly, scornfully. As though it should be no crime to rob a man who once had robbed others. That his Flying H was wholly the result of honest enterprise and a dash of luck would make no difference.

Tracy's smile was mirthless as awkwardly he wrapped the cartridge belt about his waist, buckled it. Awkwardly, too, he settled the holsters and managed to fasten down their tips. Then he caught up the lead rope of his pack horse, mounted, and point-

ed his black toward the rambling bulk of the mountains in the west.

LL morning he traveled steadily. About noon he came to a canyon filled with the gurgle of a small stream. Here there was grass in abundance for the horses. Tracy dismounted, stripped saddle gear from his black and hobbled him. His packs he slid to the ground, turning the bay loose.

"S'long, fella," he muttered, slapping a sweaty flank. "Maybe we'll meet again. Maybe not."

He had no plan save to wait for his arm to heal. Although his left-hand draw was swift, it had not the accuracy of his right—and accuracy was the one thing he meant to command the next time he faced Hal Davies.

For days Tracy loafed, fretting at the delay, tormented by brooding thoughts. Though he favored his arm, it showed no signs of healing. Rather, it seemed to grow worse. Morosely Tracy began to wonder if hate could distil poison in a man's system, then derided himself for the fantastic thought.

The spare garments out of which he was fashioning bandages were, perhaps, less clean than they looked. Maybe the bullet had embedded a thread from his shirt deep in the wound itself.

At any rate, despite using his entire supply of salt in hot packs, the fifth day found his arm badly swollen, the wound angrily inflamed. He was feverish. The pain had developed into a pounding that brought on queer, light-headed spells. It was borne upon Tracy that he would have to seek a doctor if ever he expected to make good his promise of a day of reckoning for Ruth and Hal Davies.

Slowly, doggedly, he got his outfit on the black, pulled himself aboard. He soon found that a road gait jarred his head unbearably and pulled down to a slow walk. Even so, he rode mostly with chin on chest, drifting into states of semi-consciousness from which he would rouse with a start.

He failed to notice when his mount strayed off from the direction into which he had headed it. Eventually its shrill whiny aroused him from stupor. With a jerk he straightened, passing hot hands over blurry eyes.

Around him was piled a rough landscape studded with greasewood and low mounds of salt sage. A stock trail wound about the base of a hill overlooking a dry wash. Here his black stood, ears pointed straight ahead.

Even as Tracy took this in, the animal sounded another warning of a presence ahead on the trail. The instinct of the hunted, long dormant, sprang to life within Tracy, banishing the mental fog that had bound him. Dropping knotted reins about the saddle horn, he drew his left gun and urged the black on. Half a dozen steps and he halted again, facing a rider who blocked the way—a big, burly-chested man leaning forward tensely in his saddle.

"Spane!" ejaculated the latter in profound amaze. A spasmodic jerk of hand lifted higher the bore of a sixgun.

Tracy paid it no heed. "Howdy, Lawton," he drawled.

Behind the renegade ranchman were two others, as hard of face and wary-eyed as he. The first led by halter ropes two of the finest specimens of horseflesh Tracy had ever seen—sleek, clean-limbed thoroughbreds that shouted of the race track. He had no chance to see more, for, shedding surprise, Lawton swung his horse to the side, screening his second follower from view.

"You'd best turn tail," he said meaningly. "Head back the way you come and forget you seen us."

The peremptory speech did little towards mollifying Tracy's black mood. He said deliberately, "I don't turn tail for any son of a skunk. Get out of my way!"

Lawton seemed to stop breathing. Tracy saw the squinting eyes slide to his injury, then down to the gun in his left hand. He guessed the feverish calculations running through the outlaw's mind. Lawton was realizing that, whatever the outcome of a fight at this time, he, for one, would never live to see it.

"Don't you like—" began Tracy softly, then halted as the nervous shifting of Law-

ton's horse afforded him an unexpected glimpse of the third outlaw and the animal he, in turn, led.

It was no thoroughbred. It was simply a pretty buckskin pony, and astride it, hands lashed to the saddle horn, sat a small, disheveled figure. Her face was pale. Above a gag her eyes pleaded, with hope in their blue depths.

Ruth Davies! Of a sudden Tracy understood Lawton's consternation at meeting him, why he had tried to turn him back. Despite all this girl had done to him, despite the fact that she had forfeited even his slightest loyalty or consideration, Lawton had expected him to bridle in her defense. It was what Ruth herself was praying for right now.

In Tracy's fever-twisted brain these facts became all at once excruciatingly funny. He would have flung back his head and howled with mirth had he not felt so stiff and tight inside. Instead, he heard himself saying, "Ha! Davies' horses, eh?"

"Yeah." Lawton relaxed slightly. "This'll about break him, too. He's been figurin' on cleanin' up big when the track season opens next month."

Tracy thrilled with savage satisfaction. He forgot that he himself had an honest claim upon these horses, that through them he might recover a part of the money stolen from him. More than ever in his present condition the thought of vengeance obsessed him, and he was interested solely in this added bitter blow against his enemy.

"Horses like them will be hard to move safe out of the country," he asserted. "How you aim to do it?"

One of Lawton's followers shifted uneasily, cleared his throat as though in protest against an answer. But his leader, through a greater knowledge and understanding of the man in his way, saw a way out.

"We've a freight car waitin' at the Wade water tower," he explained, fully aware that the name would mean little to a stranger in the country, as was Tracy. "There's a train goes through tonight. I've got friends—connections—so the crew's bought off to stop and pick us up. Comes daylight, we'll be clear out of the state."

Against his will Tracy heard himself inquire, "And the lady? What happens to her?"

The outlaw shrugged. "Don't tell me," he said mockingly, "that you're still fool enough to give a damn?"

Ruth made a violent motion, struggling to be free of her gag. Above it her eyes were enormous, ablaze with desperate pleading.

Stung thought he was by Lawton's words and tone, her look cut Tracy to the heart he had believed to be squeezed dry of feeling. The realization that she had still the power to move him, to hurt, filled him with a new, swift rage. In black perversity he spoke through his teeth.

"Who said I did?"

With a jerk of reins he backed his mount, clearing the trail. Lawton sheathed his gun. There was a smug lift to the corners of Lawton's mouth as he rode by. One after the other his henchmen followed, turned sideways in their saddles, uncomprehending, uneasy.

The last thing Tracy saw was Ruth's white face, her incredulous, stricken eyes.

HE COULD not shed their memory, though he immediately set about putting distance between himself and this spot. Merciful stupor did not close down upon him again. It was as though he had been given a powerful stimulant. Torn between an anguished desire to go back and rescue the girl and a stubborn refusal to surrender to this weakness, Tracy rode with no sense of direction, hard, as a man pursued by a wraith.

With surprise he found himself eventually at the river, not far from the draw down which he had traveled from the Davies ranch five days ago. The sun was gone, the western sky already dull. The voice of the stream was a low, troubled murmur. From the branches of a tree a mourning dove uttered its indescribably sad lament.

It brought home to Tracy the desolation of his life, its futility. Of a sudden his impulse was to find his enemy now and have done with it. He had gone so far as to rein towards the draw when he became

aware of a horse coming down it—fast.

Tracy knew with fateful conviction just who that rider would be even before the rider burst into the open and pulled up his lathered mount with a startled exclamation.

"Where's Ruth?" demanded Davies then. His voice was as wild as his look. "I've just come from town, so I know she hasn't gone for the sheriff. If you'd made off with her and the horses. . . ."

"I haven't," Tracy assured him. "But I know who has, and I don't give a damn! You won't, either, in a minute. Reach, and we'll get it over with!"

But Davies made no move to accept the challenge. He stared at Tracy, while on his face kindled a look of revulsion and disbelief. "I'd never of believed stubborn, bull-headed pride could bring anyone so low!" he said chokingly. "My God, Tracy! If you loved Ruth even a little, couldn't you see her side of it? Couldn't you understand she was fightin' for a lifetime of happiness with you, not just a few weeks or months?"

Tracy could only stare dumbly. Hal made a gesture of frustration.

"She tried to explain in her letter. Didn't you understand? We took your money and sank it with mine in this place up here so you'd be forced to follow us and stay!" As Tracy continued to stare he went on patiently, "It was because of Lawton. He tried to tell me a lot of stuff about your past one day. When he found out I knew and didn't care, he got ugly. I knew he'd wait until you were married to Ruth—had everything to lose—then he'd either expose you or try blackmail. I was afraid you'd kill him and outlaw yourself all over again.

"You wouldn't listen to me. I told Ruth in desperation. She was afraid you wouldn't listen to her either. You're terrible set in your ways, Tracy. So she thought of running away to force your hand. She wrote that she knew you'd be mad and hurt, but that she'd spend the rest of her life making it up to you."

Tracy said heavily, "I never got a letter."

"You must have! She left it on the shelf above the fire-place. . . ." His voice trailed off as though a possibility had startled him.

Tracy shook his head. "There was no letter," he reiterated. "Lawton come along, told about seeing you leave . . . laughed. . . ."

"Lawton!" whispered Hal, settling back in his saddle. "He saw us go, rode to the Flying H to find out why. You were gone, so he snooped inside and took the letter. That's it. He hated you, Tracy. Said that long ago you'd busted up the sweetest setup he'd ever had. He said he'd almost got even once—that one of your men talked when drunk and he passed what he'd heard to the sheriff." Hal shook his head dazedly.

Tracy thought he would never breathe again as the full import of the other's words droned through him. "Lawton!" he whispered. "And I met him a while ago—might have saved Ruth—but let him go because. . . ."

"Because all this time you've thought that Ruth and I. . . ." Hal's voice, too, trailed off. For the first time he seemed to take in Tracy's thin cheeks, the ravages of fever and suffering upon his face. "You poor, damn fool!" he whispered huskily.

But Tracy did not hear. He was recalling Ruth's white face and stricken eyes, remembering with slow-gathering horror that he had wilfully left her in the power of the man who had conspired against them both.

There was no doubting Hal's story. It all fitted together—their lack of guilt and scorn of his vengeance-seeking; how Lawton had known where to find them, known they would have stock that would make a trip to steal it worth while. Even now Lawton was well on his way with all three of his prizes—with Ruth, sweet and lovely, believing herself wantonly betrayed and cast aside by the man to whom she had given only love and fidelity.

Had Tracy been made of weaker stuff he would have cried aloud. As it was, he said merely, "The Wade water tower! They've a car there that'll be picked up by a train sometime tonight."

"Wade!" Hal straightened with a jerk, swung his horse's head to the north. Almost as abruptly he halted again. "You'd better hit for town, send out the sheriff

and a posse," he advised hurriedly, kindly. "Wade's up in the mountains above Wind River Pass. I'll have to cut across some pretty rough country to get there in time. You're in no shape for a ride like that."

"I wish I was as sure of saving Ruth as I am of being at your heels when you get there!" said Tracy grimly.

Hal gave him a straight look, then struck spurs home, sending his mount thundering on its way. So hard a pace did he set that they were high in the foothills by the time darkness had settled upon them in earnest. Yet not once did Tracy lag behind.

The memory of Ruth's look, of his own unforgivable transgression, was as a lash driving him. Truly a day of reckoning had come, but for Tracy Holt, not the two to whom he had promised it—reckoning at last for the stubbornness and black pride against which Bob Crane had warned him so long ago.

HIGHER and higher they climbed, and it seemed that hours passed. A fear that Hal had lost his way began to harass Tracy. He was on the point of calling out, when his guide reined up on an open promontory.

"It'll be close," announced Hal. "That's the train down there."

Guided by his pointing hand, Tracy picked out a tiny light in the black depths below. His heart gave a leap as his companion reined to the side, sent his horse sliding down a steep declivity. In a moment they came upon a pair of iron rails gleaming dully in moonlight.

They left their horses in a patch of timber. Ten minutes later they were looking upon the squat, dark shape of the water tower. On a siding beyond stood a boxcar emitting a feeble glow of lantern light. A low roar, growing out of the night, warned of a locomotive laboring up the steep grade through the pass.

As Tracy turned over in his mind the best method of attack, the engine's whistle cut the air—one long blast followed by two short ones. Plainly it was a signal, for at once a man's figure filled the open door of the boxcar. Tracy's blood burned with recognition of Lawton. The whistle was repeated. The outlaw dropped to the ground, calling out,

"Here she comes, boys!"

As both his henchmen followed him outside, Tracy said to Hal, "We'll have to be quick. The train crew's on their side."

Three quick strides put space between them. Then his gun was in his hand. "Lawton!" he called out sharply.

The outlaw leader gave a violent jerk. The next instant he was whirling, hand a blur of motion. It clawed only air, however, for Tracy's bullet caught him in the chest and slammed him sideways. Falling, he jarred one companion from his tracks, so that Hal's shot did nothing but bare an outlaw's head.

Tracy heard the other's muttered exclamation. Impetuously Hal Davies started forward as Lawton's followers made for the end of the boxcar, returning fire as they ran. Tracy sent one plunging forward on his face. "Hal! Come back!" he shouted, sprinting in pursuit.

Whether or not Hal would have heeded the command was never to be known, for in that moment Hal and the remaining enemy fired at each other simultaneously. The outlaw folded up and fell slowly. But Hal made an abrupt lunge, as though hurling himself bodily at his objective, hit the ground with a force that rolled him over, and lay still.

Frantic, Tracy bent over him. For Ruth's brother to be killed would be the final calamity, the last unforgivable mark in the black score against him. But Hal was breathing evenly, bleeding at one shoulder.

So violent was Tracy's relief that reaction brought all the weakness of his own condition swooping down upon him. He staggered to the boxcar door, made it inside because something like a roar—the approaching locomotive—seemed to be driving him onward.

Somehow he found Ruth amidst mountains of baled hay, set her free. He remembered whinnies and the stomping of hoofs, a struggle with a loading platform. Then something was creeping up on them with snorts and pants, sending ahead a

blinding flood of light. In it he could make out Hal lolling on the bare back of a horse, supported by a disheveled girl who controlled the second excited thoroughbred only with difficulty.

He became aware that she was leaning toward him, shouting. "There's no time for you to reach your horse! Up behind me, Tracy! Hurry!"

But one of the figures on the ground had moved, started to crawl toward a gun plainly visible in the headlight of the approaching train. "Get goin'!" Tracy yelled, and with a slap of hand sent her mount on its way.

Afterwards he looked at that empty hand bewilderedly, unable to remember where or why he had laid down his gun. To untie Ruth? The right holster was empty. But he did recall having given that weapon to her. His only hope, then, was to kick the gun on the ground out of Lawton's reach.

He fell doing it. When he struggled up, Lawton was running drunkenly towards the track. The train was almost upon them. If Lawton made it across, he would be cut off by the string of cars—safe.

Tracy was proud to be able to think so clearly. He wished he could run that well. Yet he was fleeter than he realized, for he did overtake his enemy. As his hand fell upon him he tripped over the first rail. Together they went down in the center of the track.

Lawton lay still. But Tracy was not unconscious of the monster bearing down upon them. He was trying to crawl to safety, and finding it almost impossible to move, when hands seized him. "Tracy! Tracy!" cried a voice. He was aware of being tugged at and yanked, then all sensation faded.

When he opened his eyes it was daylight. A smell of wood smoke hung in the air, and he was in a forest clearing. His attempt to move brought Ruth to his side. Her face was smudged and tear-stained, but she attempted to speak matter-of-factly.

"We'll wait here for the sheriff, Tracy. Hal's gone after him. He was only scratched and stunned. But Lawton's dead—like the other two. We got him off the track with you but he'd hit his head on a rail. He—" tears began to slide down her cheeks— "he told me about taking the letter. Taunted me with what you believed about Hal and me."

"I'm sorry," whispered Tracy miserably.

She smiled through her tears. "You needn't be. The train went on and we'll never be able to prove anything on its crew. But that's past and done, too. All that matters is for Hal to get here with a wagon so we can take you home."

"Home!" Tracy's head was whirling again, and it wasn't entirely because of his physical state. "You mean—you and Hal—are takin' me back?" he faltered incredulously.

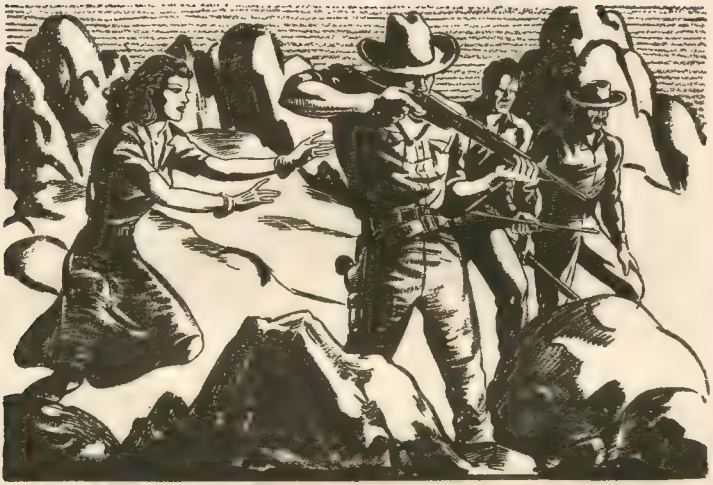
Ruth shook her head. "We're asking you to take *us* back." She leaned low to kiss dry, feverish lips, adding contritely, "Weren't we the ones who ran away?"

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

All But the Girl

A colorful romantic novelette

By MYRTLE JULIETTE COREY



Double Trouble

By Richard Worthington

They had hoped, these two, that their love would bridge the gap between their families, but it looked as if they'd brought on a range war instead.

BOUNCING up from the sheer rock walls, the sun's glare made Rance almost invisible as he crept down the open slope, darting from rock to rock, taking whatever cover he could find from the ambush guns at the foot of the draw. His slight, black-clad figure seemed more shadow than flesh to Julie's eyes; she couldn't make herself feel that any of this was real. The men around her made no sound; their watching was as intense as her own.

High overhead, a black bird wheeled against the sky's molten shimmer. The only sound was the scrabble and scrape of Rance's boots skidding and slipping over the stone-rubbled ground.

Time had ceased to exist. Time was only Rance MacAllister down there, inching along, with death ahead of him and death behind. Time was Rance, pocketed by guns.

Up here, the angry men with rifles, watching, waiting. Down there, other men with rifles, watching, waiting, too. But Rance had no gun.

Rance was a spy and a murderer. She believed that, didn't she? Then what did it matter what happened to him? Nothing at all, really; except that in those aching, dragging seconds, Julie knew again, and more strongly than ever, that she loved him.

He had nearly reached the bottom now, the dynamite sticks slung along his back. "That's far enough, Rance," a voice called

sharply from below. "You better rest where you are."

Rance just kept going. You could almost see his body tense against the impact of the bullets that would surely come.

Beside Julie, Brade Barnett stirred slightly. His eyes were jetty bright against the sweat-streaked tan of his face. "I told you it was a trick," he muttered angrily. "He's still their breed. *They* aren't going to shoot. He'll get clean away."

Julie watched Brade's rifle barrel lift.

"Well, if they don't shoot him, I will," Brade said flatly. "As soon as he gets out from behind that ledge." Brade's finger tightened slowly on the trigger. His hand was as steady as stone. . . .

IT WAS hard to say exactly when it began. Perhaps it was already in the cards when Jeremiah Jarrett first came to this mesa, with his son Jere and his daughter Jane, who was Julie's mother. In those days, his mind had been bright with visions of the vast cattle empire he was going to build from that first straggly herd of Texas longhorns. He couldn't fail. There was magic to that letter J, and unquenchable luck. The JJ would spread and spread until it took everything between the Canadian River and Carabozo Creek. All his children would bear that doubled J, and their children; and he'd been foolishly pleased when Julie's mother had married Frank Johnson. She would be a JJ, too; like her cousins, the twins Jesse and Jonas.

But before the JJ could do much spreading, the MacAllisters—the Colonel and his brother Aran, and their children—had come to homestead the tract below High Mesa, fencing the JJ off forever, blocking its growth.

There'd been more to the trouble than just the usual cowman-granger bitterness. It went back to the patrician roots of the MacAllisters in Tennessee, to the humble, shanty-origins of Jeremiah Jarrett in Kentucky. Pride had fought against envy. Resentment had simmered up in little ways—mean, spiteful tricks to be laughed at in secret. But it had never come to this before. Never this killing, this guns-drawn war.

Perhaps *that* had started on the rain-soaked night when Julie had come home after five years spent with her father's sister on an Oklahoma farm. Julie had almost forgotten what life along Freshwater Creek could be like.

And she'd forgotten too how any rainy-season cloudburst could turn the narrow road that served the mesa into a ribbon of gummy mud. Finding no cousin to meet her at the stage station and sure she could beat the threatening storm, she'd started out in the livery stable rig. The rain caught her almost squarely halfway between the ranch and town. And just by the turn-in to the MacAllister place, the rig careened into a rain-scooped rut and overturned, snapping an axle and pitching Julie out into the ooze. Before she could get to her feet, the frightened horse had kicked loose from the traces and gone galloping back the way he had come.

Knowing it would be foolish to try to plow through the storm on foot, Julie made her way to the MacAllister house to wait until the rain stopped.

Just as she was mounting the steps to the broad, pillared veranda of the big white house, she heard light, quick footsteps behind her. As she turned, lightning flared whitely, revealing them to each other.

"Julie," Rance said softly. "Julie Johnson." He sounded glad to see her and from somewhere out of the years behind her, a singing came to her heart. Even that brief flash of lightning had shown her that Rance, grown up, was still Rance.

"Yes," she said. "It's me, Rance. I've come home. To stay."

He drew her up on the veranda, his hand lightly resting on her arm. And they stood that way, facing each other wordlessly, remembering.

The last time she'd seen him, he'd been fifteen. And if ever a half-grown girl two years younger than that could be in love, Julie had been in love with Rance. She'd tagged around after him ever since she could remember; and the tension between the two families had made everything seem like a game of hide-and-seek that they shared. They even found a secret place to meet—over in the brasada between the north slope of the mesa and MacAllister's fields. They chose it because no one else

ever had any reason for going there; and because the red clay soil that bottomed it wasn't to be found anywhere else for miles around, and made it seem unique and special, set apart just for them.

There'd been awful ructions when the Colonel had found them there one day; and he'd packed Rance summarily off to military school in Alamo for a year. Before Rance could return, Grampa Jarrett, not to be outdone by any MacAllister, had sent Julie to companion her aunt on the lonely farm.

Now the aunt was dead and Julie had come home. Rance was taller, a little, but his eyes still had that clear steadiness and his smile was still as warm and sunny as she remembered it. And standing there facing him, Julie's heart knew surely and strongly that nothing in her had changed either. She loved Rance still. She would always love him. It was nothing you could question or puzzle over. It simply *was*.

Rain gusted in under the portico. Rance stirred and his laughter seemed forced and nervous. "You'll drown out here," he said. Then he hesitated. "I guess you better come inside." He sounded a little dubious, and Julie sensed his mood instantly, the way she'd always been able to.

She put her hand swiftly on his sleeve. "Rance," she began, "our families—they're not still acting—foolish?"

He didn't really answer her. Just shrugged and twisted the door-knob. "Best come in, Julie," he said. And something deep in her chest went cold and stiff. She followed him inside.

THEY were all there, gathered about the big living room, as stiffly ranged as figures at a funeral. Their faces turned toward her as she entered. A tense, hostile little stir flickered around the room. The Colonel and Aran were playing at chess. Rance's two sisters were sewing by the big center table; their husbands and Aran MacAllister's son Tim were slapping cards into a hat. For a moment, everybody seemed to freeze, then the Colonel muttered something, and the two women fluttered.

Tim MacAllister, rawboned and with eyes that never seemed quite to look at you, was the only one who really spoke to her at all. "Well, it's Julie, all right," he said with a grin. "Purtier than two pictures." The Colonel frowned; and Rance did, too.

Then Rance led Julie over to the fire and told them about her mishap. "I'm—I'm grateful for your shelter," Julie said, frozen into stiffness herself. She stood with her back to the grate and glanced around the room. Everything seemed dimmed, impoverished. The insufficient fire didn't begin to cut the chill in the air. The low-turned lamps didn't dispel the thick shadows of the room's dim corners. The dresses of the two women were outmoded and oft-mended. Whatever else had happened in the five years Julie had been away, the MacAllisters hadn't prospered. She wondered how things had fared up on the mesa.

She had never felt less welcome anywhere in her life, and Rance's efforts to make conversation made it all seem worse. Julie was relieved when, after two sharp thumps on the panel, the door pushed open and Brade Barnett came towering into the room.

His eyes found Julie instantly and he held out both hands to her. His powerful bigness, the deep rich bronze of his face made the finer-moulded MacAllisters seem like waxen miniatures. He dwarfed them completely, blotting them out. All but Rance.

"I saw the rig in the road," Brade said. "I guessed you'd be here." He glared briefly around at the now openly hostile faces. "I guess you'd better come along in the wagon with me."

Julie glanced around the room, her eyes resting briefly on Rance's face. "Thanks for your hospitality," she said primly. "Rance, I—" Then she fell silent. The next move had to be his.

"Julie, we're—" he began, raggedly; then finished in a burst of defiance; "I have to see you, Julie."

Julie's smile was confident. "Of course, Rance. Any time you like."

"Not on the mesa, MacAllister," Brade said sharply, his face darkening. "You

won't be welcome." And he pushed Julie through the door before she had a chance to protest.

He didn't speak again until they were turning into the main road, Julie beside him bundled under the tarpaulin. "I didn't mean to sound off so sharp Julie," he said. "But them MacAllisters are worse now than they've ever been. Had a couple of crop failures. Makes 'em mean. They blame everything that happens on us. They been shooting our steers—claimed our cattle had busted down the fences. Trouble is they're too stingy to keep the wire mended. We've had some trouble with tainted water holes, too, and it sure ain't us poisoning our own cattle."

Julie's heart sank. "But they're neighbors, Brade. There must be some way we can get on."

"Not with them," Brade said flatly. "Tim MacAllister and I used to be pals, but since things have got so bad we don't see each other any more. So if you and Rance got any ideas about starting up again, best forget 'em."

"That's something for Rance and me to say," Julie said firmly, but doubts were stirring in her heart.

"Reckon Grampa Jarrett might have a word of his own to speak, too," Brade said, flicking the reins sharply against the dashboard.

Brade was funny. He wasn't really a Jarrett at all. His brother Phil had married Julie's cousin, Justine, and Brade had come up to the mesa too. But in some ways he was more Jarrett than any of the others. He was the strongest, too. Grampa recognized that, and by hard work and sound sense Brade had won his place in the dynasty. He was named in Grampa's will right along with the others.

"Here's Julie home," Brade said when they reached the ranch house. "Found her down at the MacAllister's. Thought I'd better bring her home right away."

The family clamored around her. Grampa kissed her cheek and embraced her briefly. Justine hugged her and the twins, Jess and Jonas, alike as the two halves of a split pea, grinned their welcome. Jess even noticed the brooch she was wearing had lost two stones. But then Jess never missed a thing. And that was how you could tell him from his duller-eyed twin, Jonas.

But even in their friendly pleasure at her return, she realized how completely she had stepped into another world. Somehow Texas, fast-growing as it was, hadn't yet reached up into this corner. This was Freshwater Creek and the Burning Hills. She had stepped into some forgotten fragment of time that was almost feudal.

And she was suddenly frightened. . . . The rain on the night of her homecoming was the last of the wet spell. The next morning was bright and fiercely hot; the wind seemed to shrivel the ground. Before many days had gone by, the smaller water holes were dry, and the cattle had to be driven from the north pasture down to Freshwater Creek, bellowing their thirst.

"Gonna be worse even than last year," Grampa Jarrett glumly predicted. "Sure is lucky for us the crick's running good and clear. If we couldn't get a good fat herd to market this year, things'd be mighty bad for the Double J."

After that first spell of fear and strangeness, Julie settled easily enough into the Jarrett ways. She helped Justine with the chores in the mornings, or rode with Brade or Jess to look at the cattle. But in the afternoons she eluded them and galloped the little brockled mare down to the red-clay bottomland of the brasada. If Rance had meant what he said about seeing her, he would remember the brasada.

On the fifth day, he came.

He slid from his horse and ran to her. Their meeting needed no speech. She went into his arms as if they'd been made slender and strong to hold only her. His fingers touched the sunny gold of her hair; his lips brushed her mouth.

"You never kissed me before, Rance," she said, a kind of blue wonder in her eyes.

"I always wanted to," he told her. "I wanted to the other night." A frown crossed his face, like a cloud sliding over the sun. The sureness left his voice. "Julie, this is right, isn't it? This is the way we were meant to be, isn't it? We got to make it right somehow, Julie."

"We will, Rance," she assured him. "We will."

He smiled at her. "You're so small," he

said, gathering her close again. "So fearful small."

Rance was no giant himself, she thought. And in some ways he seemed younger even than she. But there was strength enough in his arms to crush her tight against his chest; and sweetness enough on his mouth to make her feel giddily drunk when he kissed her.

"We got to think about it some, Julie," he said. "About the way our folks keep after each other all the time." His brow clouded over again. And she knew what was troubling him. Being a MacAllister was, always had been, Rance's religion. It was part of his bone and his blood. Even his love for her couldn't shake it out of him completely.

But the smell of the gum trees, even on the dusty wind, was sweet and sassy; the sun was bright and warm; and Julie felt strong and confident. "We can't let it be bigger than we are, Rance. We count for something too. We've got to beat it, some way."

There were times, though, when Rance didn't seem minded to beat it. When all he expected of Julie was her complete surrender. And it was all very well to feel so strong and sure when Rance had his arms around her; but she couldn't always be in his arms and when she wasn't, she couldn't ignore the hateful thing between their families that seemed bent on overpowering them and on destroying everything that she and Rance shared between them.

THE blasting heat, day by day, sucked the life from the ground, turned the cottonwood leaves to paper dryness, dried the patience and kindness from men's tempers. Julie felt the tension in the air.

Things got worse instead of better. Jess Jarrett and Tim MacAllister had a brawl on Caliber's main street. There were broken MacAllister fences. Things were making for a head. Julie could feel it in her bones, and the dread inside of her grew and grew. Not even the swift, broken meetings with Rance in the brasada could hold it in check. For Rance and she were as apt to quarrel now as kiss, and the quarrel was always the same. And Julie grew more afraid.

Then one day, the sharp-eyed Jess who never missed anything saw Julie and Rance together and told Brade about it. Brade was furious. Julie had never seen the controlled strength of him slip so nearly out of harness. He caught her by the arms and shook her. He stormed at her, his eyes fierce and ink-black in their anger.

"Stop it, Brade," she cried, shaking herself free. "You have no right. This has nothing to do with you."

"It has," he raged. "I'm as much a Jarrett as any of you. And some day, you and I are—well, *we're* going to be the Jarretts around here. This will be ours, Julie, and nobody else's."

His words made no sense, but Julie didn't question them then. Brade was merely ranting in anger. And then his tone changed quickly, softened almost to a whisper and he put his arm around her.

"I love you, Julie, don't you know that? I've loved you ever since I can remember. And sometimes I go nearly loco with wanting you. Nobody's going to take you from me, hear? Nobody. And 'specially not a MacAllister. Not that Rance—"

She pushed him firmly away from her. "I didn't know you felt like this, Brade, and I'm sorry. Truly. But a person can't take from you something that never was yours."

"I'll make you love me, Julie."

"No, Brade. Not ever."

So now she had Brade to worry about, too. To worry about and fear a little. If she hadn't had Brade on her mind so much, she never would have let that quarrel with Rance run on, bitter and unchecked, the way she did.

But suddenly they were saying mean things to each other, things neither of them meant. Then Julie gripped his arm and said, "Hush, Rance. We mustn't quarrel like this, please."

It was too late, though. The stiffness in Rance wouldn't melt. The temper she'd known and feared in him ever since she could remember flared up and stared at her, naked, out of his narrowed eyes.

"There's no use to quarrel," he told her savagely. "You stop being stubborn."

"But I've told you, Rance, I want our

marriage to be—well, a sort of seal between our families. A mark of peace. I can't just marry you and stop being what I am. I can't desert them like that."

"No matter what you are," he insisted, "once you marry me, you'll be a MacAllister and no other thing. So are you going to marry me right now—*my* way—or aren't you?"

Helplessly she shook her head. She knew she was right. "I can't, Rance. We have to wait."

She could feel him trembling against her. "That all you've a mind to say?"

Tears stung her eyes, hot and helpless and salty. "I don't want it to be, Rance."

"Is it?"

She loosened his hold. "While things are like this, it has to be." She waited a minute for him to speak, then she mounted the brockled mare and flicked the reins.

When she looked back from the rise of the mesa, he was still standing where she had left him, the set of his body taut with rage, his eyes staring stonily after her.

She hadn't gone more than half a mile when she heard the high whine of the rifle. She stopped the horse and sat, trembling. Then she wheeled the mare around and galloped back to the brasada.

Even from a distance, she could tell it wasn't Rance lying there stretched out on the hard red clay. It was Jess. The back of his shirt was wet with blood when she touched it. It was awful seeing him like that, so lifeless and still. And yet somehow she could feel no surprise. Something deep in her had expected this, or something equally evil.

And in that moment, her whole body seemed to freeze. Her movements as she got back on the mare to ride to the house for help were stiff and jerky, like a puppet's. She couldn't even cry. It was as if all the life in her had died out completely.

She tried not to think of Rance and the flaming ugly mood she had left him in. She tried not to remember that Jess had seen them once, that he might have quarreled with Rance after she had left. More than anything else, she would not permit her mind to dwell on the rifle bullet that had entered Jess's body from the back.

She had almost reached the place where she'd heard the shot when she met Brade Barnett. His white horse was coming toward her at a gallop, red dust streaking the sweat foam on his flanks.

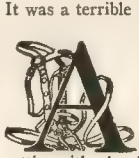
"I passed Rance on the road back from town," he said. "He was going like blazes. What's the matter, Julie?"

"Back there—Jess—" was all she could manage to say.

Jess didn't live very long after they got him back to the house. He didn't even get to say who had shot him. But the Jarretts in their silent, stricken, angry grief didn't need to hear the name of MacAllister spoken. They scarcely looked up when Jess's twin, Jonas, his face all ugly and twisted, the cords swelling out on his neck, began to curse in a low ugly monotone.

"Them MacAllisters! This is the first killing between us, but it ain't going to be the last."

"Hush up, Jonas," Grampa said sharply. "We don't know nothin' yet." Jonas's big face crumpled, then, and he began to cry. It was a terrible thing to see.



AMONG the cottonwoods the next day they quietly buried Jess. And although Jonas and Phil Barnett, Brade's brother, wanted them to ride down and settle with the MacAllisters right away, Grampa Jarrett held them back. "There's law here," he said stonily. "We'll wait and see what the law does." And he sent Brade in to the sheriff.

It was the next day that Rance came up to the mesa. Julie was out by the barn when suddenly Rance, his face white and more troubled than she'd ever seen it, loomed up beside her.

At the sight of him, she gasped. "Rance—you must be crazy—coming here! Go away quickly!"

He gripped her by the arm. "You gotta listen, Julie. I—I quit my folks. What they did last night was something so dirty—mean, I couldn't stand for it, family or no. I came up here to warn you people. You told me what that herd meant to you and—"

She shook herself free. "I don't know what you're talking about. But my cousin Jess is dead, Rance. Did you—" She

choked on the question, and Rance seemed not to hear her.

"I know. I'm awful sorry, Julie." The bigness of having cut himself off from his family seemed to be all that he could take in. "Julie, listen!"

She made herself say it then, slowly, and with a terrible distinctness. "Did you kill him, Rance?"

His eyes turned hard and clear. "I heard he was shot in the back, Julie," he said, softly, as if that was his only answer.

"Rance, I—I have to hear you say it right out. Don't you see how it must look?" Her voice rose shakily. "I left you there —where he was found. You were angry. You—"

A shadow moved across the ground between them and she was staring up into Brade's face. "So it was Rance," he said quietly, vindictively. He swept Julie aside and caught Rance's shoulder. His fist balled into a knot, and Julie flung herself across his arm. She'd seen Brade split a board with a blow of that fist.

Then somehow the others were there, all of them. Things were moving with the swift unreality of a nightmare. And Brade in that flat, angry tone was accusing Rance of killing Jess. "I heard Julie say it."

"No—nó, you didn't. I never—" Her dazed protest was lost in the angry shout that went up. Jonas lunged forward, his fingers hooked out to grab Rance's throat.

"It don't take much rope to hang a back-shooter," he said bitterly. "What're we waitin' for?"

"Hold on," Grampa Jarrett commanded. "He'll keep. Right now we got somethin' to worry about more important even than Jess. Phil and me's just been down to the crick. It's gone bone-dry. If we don't get that herd watered somehow, we're goin' to lose every last head."

Rance shook himself free of Jonas' hands. "That crick never ran dry," he said. "My —my people blocked it up, turned it out of the channel. That's what I came up here to tell you. I don't fight with dumb critters." His mouth squared. "And I don't shoot a man in the back."

"Looks like you came a little late," Grampa Jarrett said stiffly.

"I didn't know about it until just now. But I know where the block is and how you can get at it to blast it loose."

"He's lying," Brade said. "Julie musta told him how much that herd counted to us. That it was sell it or quit. And that's why they done it. Only reason he came up here likely was to find out anythin' else he could that might do us a hurt."

Rance lunged forward, his fists swinging. But Jonas and Phil shoved him back. "You better show us quick," Grampa said. "I don't know as I've mind to hold the boys back much longer."

"I'll show you," Rance said wearily. "You can slide down that gully there by the south corner of the mesa. It's right at the bottom they got the stream blocked off."

When they got there and moved to the mesa rim, a shot spat out from below. "They're waitin' for us!" Brade shouted, and warned the others back. "The whole thing was just a trick to get us inside their rifle sights."

Peering cautiously over the edge, they could see where a fall of boulders damned the creek, sending its waters to spill out over the rocky ground, shutting it off from the lowlands where the herd was pastured on the mesa's lowest slope. They could see it. But with MacAllister guns trained on every inch of that all-but-naked incline, they couldn't hope to reach it.

"Get your dynamite," Rance said, sweat shining on his set face. "If you're scared to go down, I'll do it. Mebbe that'll prove I don't want any part of this." His eyes rested for a minute on Julie's face. "Mebbe if they put a bullet in me, you'll know I'm not lying. About this or anything else."

AND so he'd gone, with a defiant shout to his kin below, and a brief last look at Julie. Gone down there between the two groups of guns.

Brade's threat still hung in Julie's ears. The sun shone redly against Julie's half-closed eyelids. Its redness made her think, oddly, of the brasada floor where Jess had lain. Red dust. . . .

Her mind fumbled, groped for something. And then with a quick little intake of breath she found it. She remembered the red dust she had seen on Brade's horse the day Jess had died. Brade hadn't been to town; he'd

been on the brasada, too. He must have been. There wasn't any other red clay for miles around.

Swifter than light, her mind flashed back over Brade's words and actions. Brade's threats about Rance. The fierce ambition that rankled in him to be more Jarrett than the rest, to be the head of the family some day, with Julie by his side. The burning, unchecked power she'd felt in him.

She couldn't add it all up yet, but in those swift split seconds, her mind and body tensed to a decision. Even as Brade pulled trigger, she thrust herself sharply against him, spoiling his aim. His bullet went wild, and Rance flattened swiftly against the rocks below. From the MacAllister ambush, as if in answer to Brade's shot, came two others. One spanged against the rock where Rance was crouching. The second, fired by Col. MacAllister at close range, sent Tim MacAllister sprawling out on the gully floor. Julie'd seen it with her own eyes, and yet she couldn't believe it. Then the Colonel stooped swiftly and dragged Tim back, wounded in one arm. Nobody else moved a muscle.

"The Colonel shot Tim," Julie said wonderingly. "But why?"

"That's what we better find out," Grampa Jarrett said. "No. Wait, Brade."

And then the Colonel, a handkerchief flickering white in his fingers, came climbing up the slope. "I reckon you and I had better have a talk," he said to Grampa when he reached the top. "And somebody'd better take Brade's gun." He turned to Brade directly. "I couldn't let Tim shoot Rance, Brade. Not even if Tim was taking orders from you."

Somehow, in the hushed, bitter weariness of the Colonel's voice, the nightmare was ended. It released Julie and the others. She ran down the slope to Rance's side.

Brade couldn't talk; but Tim was scared, and he told them how it was. He and Brade hadn't stopped seeing each other, except openly. All the things that had gone wrong between the two families, Tim or Brade had contrived. The cut wires. The poisoned water holes.

"Brade wanted to start the fightin' up again," Tim said. "He never said exactly why. But I had to help him—he had a big IOU of mine I couldn't pay. Threatened to put me in jail. He even gave me the idea for blockin' this stream and for lettin' Rance find out about it. He figgered it out we could catch Rance between the guns and kill him without it lookin' like a murder. He sure hated Rance. Because o' Julie, I guess. But I never meant to kill Rance. Just put a bullet in him somewheres to satisfy Brade."

"I can see why Brade'd want to kill me," Rance said later when he and Julie had ridden, almost by instinct, out to the brasada. "But why Jess—and what was the point to starting our folks fighting again?"

"You couldn't fool Jess about what was going on," Julie said. "He knew everything. He must have found out about Brade and Tim; maybe he saw them meet. I think Brade forced Jess out to the brasada at the point of the gun and shot him before Jess could tell anybody about it. Jess would have given Brade a chance to explain before he told anybody else. That honesty cost him his life.

"And about the feuding—unless you knew what Brade was really like, it would sound crazy. But Brade wanted to be the head of the family when Grampa died. He and I were going to rule the Jarretts together, he thought. Jesse and Jonas stood in his way. If he could get the Jarretts and the MacAlisters really in a range war, he could come out on top."

"But how about Justine's husband, Phil—that's Brade's own brother. He couldn't have meant to kill him too."

Julie sighed. "Phil's weak. He wouldn't have made a fuss about letting Brade run things. Besides, Justine's always wanted to get away, I think. Brade could have bought them out. . . . And whatever trouble there was between the families made everything just that much more impossible for us."

"He came awful close to getting what he was after," Rance said, his arm tightening around Julie's waist.

"So close it frightens me, Rance."

"But he didn't, Julie, and that's what matters. So now all you've got to do is say you'll marry me—" he smiled—"*my* way."

"Your way, Rance, or any way at all." And she turned her face up for him to kiss.

The Man Who Couldn't Miss

By Paul Evan Lehman

It was an uncanny skill with which he'd been born, and there came a time when Kent Bradford would have given the whole world to be without it.

I

Unhappy Warrior

"SYD HARPER'S still in town!" The man said it from the corner of his mouth and in a voice intended only for the cowboy who stood at the hitching-rail.

Kent Bradford made no reply, but almost imperceptibly his features froze. Inwardly he went cold and sick. Not with fear—but with repugnance.

For a moment longer he stood there bracing himself for what must come, then stepped reluctantly to the plank sidewalk and started along the street. Men nodded soberly to him as he passed, only their eyes showing the avid interest they felt. One of them warned him in a whisper, "Inside the Ace High, cowboy."

Again Bradford gave no sign that he had heard. He continued on his way, his tread catlike, the granite cast of his face lending him an appearance of age far beyond his years. He wondered vaguely if Billy the Kid had felt as he did. When Billy fell under the bullet of Pat Garrett he had killed a white man for every year of his life.

There were few people on the street, but Bradford could feel their eyes stabbing at him from beyond doors and windows. Near the Ace High he cut into the street and crossed it diagonally to a store. He sat

down on the low step and mechanically rolled a cigarette. The saloon was directly opposite, and from within it came a voice, the words indistinguishable. That would be Harper making his brags. A light footstep sounded behind Kent, but he did not turn. Then he caught sight of a riding skirt and a pair of small boots and got to his feet. "Howdy, Ellen," he said, and touched his hat.

She turned to look up at him and he saw that her face was pale. "So you're stalking another victim," she said.

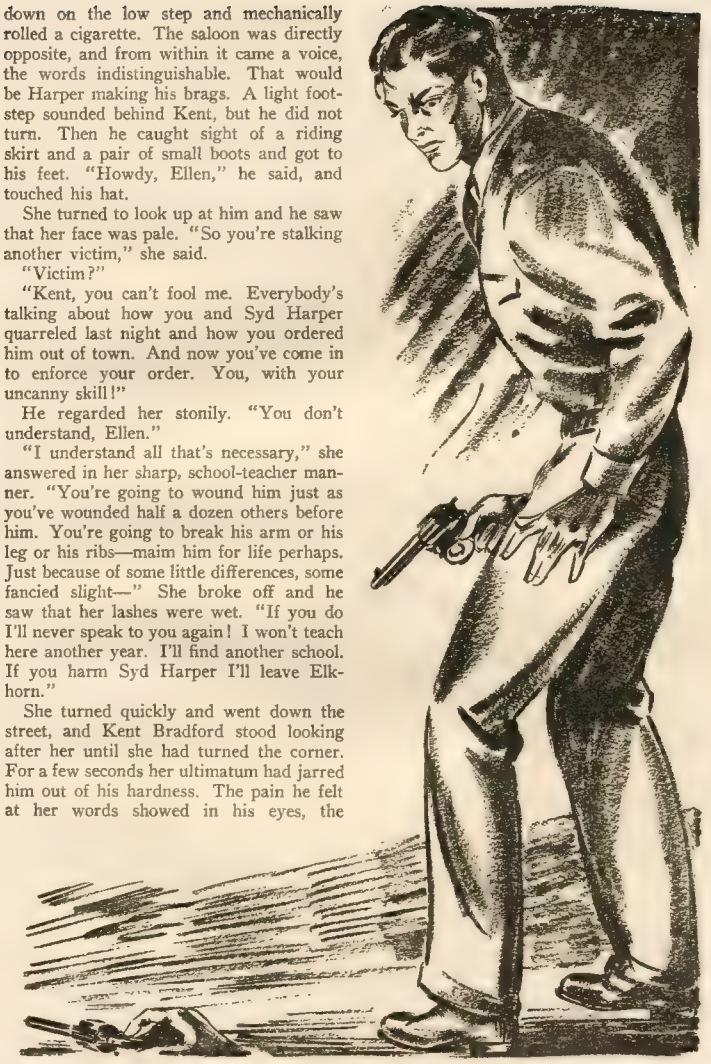
"Victim?"

"Kent, you can't fool me. Everybody's talking about how you and Syd Harper quarreled last night and how you ordered him out of town. And now you've come in to enforce your order. You, with your uncanny skill!"

He regarded her stonily. "You don't understand, Ellen."

"I understand all that's necessary," she answered in her sharp, school-teacher manner. "You're going to wound him just as you've wounded half a dozen others before him. You're going to break his arm or his leg or his ribs—maim him for life perhaps. Just because of some little differences, some fancied slight—" She broke off and he saw that her lashes were wet. "If you do I'll never speak to you again! I won't teach here another year. I'll find another school. If you harm Syd Harper I'll leave Elkhorn."

She turned quickly and went down the street, and Kent Bradford stood looking after her until she had turned the corner. For a few seconds her ultimatum had jarred him out of his hardness. The pain he felt at her words showed in his eyes, the



muscles of his face. She didn't understand; women never did. To back out now would be to concede Syd Harper a moral victory. Others would gain courage from this sign of weakness, and they would dog him and make him swallow insults until in desperation he must shoot again. And again. And in the end he would have to kill.

A moment of hot resentment filled him. Why had nature given him this strange gift which was his? He had shot accurately ever since he could remember shooting at all. From his earliest days some sort of gun had been his plaything. He had cut his teeth on a wooden one carved by his father, had owned a twenty-two when other boys toted cap pistols, and a Peacemaker Colt when he was still so small that he sagged under the weight of it and had to hold it with both hands to shoot. His brain had become a calculating machine which computed angles and deflection and windage and velocity all in one instantaneous, involuntary operation. He had been marked as the man who couldn't miss.

He sank back on the step again. Now he could realize that the ending had been inevitable. His unusual ability at target shooting had stirred the competitive spirit of others. Even as a boy he had contested with men who had used the sixgun all their lives. As his reputation spread, men went out of their way to test their skill against his. Invariably he won. The reluctance to admit another's superiority is a human trait. For every champion there are a thousand less competent who firmly believe themselves better and are never satisfied until the issue has been joined. And even after defeat they want to try again.

Beaten at target shooting, there were those who said, "Just wait until the boy goes up against the real thing. Shooting at a man is a heap different from shooting at bottles or tin cans. When you have to shoot or be shot—that's the test!"

So at last came the time when Kent Bradford had to shoot for his life. In that day an encounter with sixguns was not difficult to bring about. A studied insult, a blow, an offensive action and the opportunity was there. Kent was eighteen when his first gunfight was forced on him. Confident of his ability, young and filled with the love of life, he had not tried to kill his opponent, merely drilling a neat hole in the fellow's shoulder almost before that surprised person had yanked his gun.

Other gunfights followed, and in all of them young Bradford had stuck to a determination not to kill. This very determination brought on more contestants who might have hesitated had they known that they must pay for failure with their lives, and Kent found himself forced to shoot faster and closer. Now he must shoot it out with Syd Harper, the handsome, smooth-tongued gambler who had come to Elkhorn a few weeks before.

Kent became aware of movement in the saloon across the street. He had heard Syd Harper's voice, "One last round, boys," without its significance registering. Now came the soft tread of feet and the vague features of a man peering over the half-doors.

An icy chill swept over Kent Bradford, followed almost immediately by a comfortable, glowing warmness. His face assumed its hard lines again, but the rest of him remained relaxed, easy. He didn't feel for his gun; he didn't need to. He knew that gun as he knew his right hand. It was always there and ready. He didn't even get up.

The doors parted and Harper stepped out. He was crouched and his fingers were hooked above the butt of his gun. His keen black eyes bored across the street at the figure lounging on the store steps. He took three quick strides and as the swinging doors rocked lazily behind him came to a stop at the end of the hitching-rack.

Bradford's face did not change expression. He was resting with his left elbow on the step above that on which he sat, his right side turned slightly towards Harper. His gun was belted tight about him, butt forward on the left side. He used a cross-body draw and his right arm was entirely free.

Harper went into action with a suddenness calculated to disconcert his opponent. There was a blur of movement so smooth as almost to defy detection. The fingers closed on the butt of the low-hung gun and drew it in one motion.

There was an explosion, but it wasn't

Syd's gun. Even before the seven-and-one-half-inch barrel had cleared leather, Kent drew and fired. It is doubtful if any of those who watched so avidly even saw the draw. One instant he was lounging there on the steps with his right hand empty, the next he still lounged but flame was leaping from his extended arm.

The bullet hit the iron barrel of Harper's Colt and tore it from his grasp as though it had been struck with a sledge. So astonishing was it that Syd just stood there and stared. And as he stared, the gun on the far side of the street slipped smoothly into its holster and Kent Bradford's words reached him.

"I said to get out of town, Harper. Reckon now you know I meant it."

Syd, mouth open, raised his right hand and gazed at it as though he found it impossible to believe that it was empty. Then the red of mortification rose in his cheeks and the look of astonishment gave way to one of rage and frustration. He straightened, looked long and hard at the lounging figure on the store steps, then turned as though to go back into the saloon.

But he didn't. Concealed by his body, his right hand dived beneath his coat and came out with the short-barreled gun he carried in a shoulder holster. He spun on one heel, checked the motion, fired quickly at Bradford. And this time Kent really had to shoot. The movement had caught him off his guard, but so rapid was it that it also spoiled Syd's aim. The bullet plunked into the step at Bradford's side, and the next instant the Peacemaker was out and another streak of fire darted at Syd like the tongue of a snake.

The man staggered with the impact of the lead, recovered his balance, stood swaying for three seconds—back, forth; back, forth; back, forth. He tried to raise the Derringer but couldn't quite do it. He collapsed suddenly and completely, like a wet rag.

Kent sighed and got to his feet. His glance went to the corner around which Ellen had vanished. She was standing there watching, and he knew he would carry the picture of her face to his grave. Then she was gone and he walked wearily, as if each step was an effort, across the street towards his horse.

II

Flight

A FAIR-HAIRED boy of twenty crossed in front of him on the run, "Damn you, Bradford!" he cried as he passed. He was Ellen's brother, Ronald.

Kent gave no sign that he had heard, but his face was bleak as he swung into the saddle. Ronnie had liked him once, but Syd Harper had turned the boy against him. And Ronnie's friendship for Syd had undoubtedly influenced Ellen.

He flashed a quick look towards the saloon as he pivoted his horse. Ronnie was on his knees beside the stricken Harper and was working over him. Kent heard him say, "Couple of you boys give me a hand. We'll take him over to my house."

As Kent turned back his eyes met those of Ellen. She didn't say a word, but in her hot glance he read scorn and disappointment and dislike. At the moment he felt sure she hated him. He groaned inwardly and spurred his horse to a lope. Again he had tried to miss a vital spot, but his shot had been hurried and there was ever present the haunting fear that the bullet had struck an inch or so wide of where he had intended it to strike. The sweat stood out on his forehead; God knew he wanted no man's life.

He reached his father's ranch at noon and mechanically took his place at the table. John Bradford knew he had ordered Harper out of town, but they had kept word of the quarrel from Kent's mother. When they left the table and went outside the elder Bradford said, "Harper leave?"

"No."

"You have to—"

"Wounded him."

John Bradford sighed his relief. He had been responsible in a large measure for his son's skill and at first had taken huge pride in it; but as this uncanny ability grew, pride was replaced by awe and then dismay. He had no wish to see his son transformed into a killer and most certainly did not want him injured.

"Sooner or later you're goin' to have to

shoot for keeps," he said flatly. "You know that."

"Not if I can help it." Then, passionately, "Why don't the fools let me alone? Can't they understand they haven't a chance?" There was no boastfulness about it; he stated it as a plain fact.

"Only thing they realize is that you always shoot to wound. Men'll take all sorts of chances to prove they're better than you as long as they know they're goin' to come through alive. The thing that worries me is that one of these days they're goin' to gang up on you and you'll have to kill somebody or get killed yourself. And there's only one way out of it." He went on vehemently, "Get out of Elkhorn and go where nobody knows you. Keep out of quarrels. If you make an enemy, go somewhere else. Let the fools think what they will, *you'll* know you're the better man. That's sufficient."

Kent spoke slowly. "You mean that?"

"Yes!" John Bradford made a passionate gesture. "I know it sounds haywire comin' from me, but it's the only way."

"If you were in my place, would you go?"

John Bradford opened his mouth, closed it again. "No," he said finally. "I wouldn't have the courage to go. I hoped that you had. If not—well, I know Sheriff Cunningham right well. I believe I can get him to take you on as a deputy. Then at least you'll be shootin' on the side of the law and men won't be so anxious to cross you."

Kent shook his head. "I don't want the death of any man hanging over me. I'll never deliberately shoot to kill."

There it ended for the time being. Kent inquired regularly about Syd Harper and learned that while his bullet had struck where he had aimed, infection had set in and the man was in grave danger. He was at the Blake home and Ellen was nursing him. For a week Kent was in torment. Then came word that Harper was improving and Kent's spirits rose.

He stuck close to the ranch and made no effort to see Ellen. It would be useless. Ellen had come from the East with her brother and had secured a position teaching in Elkhorn's school. She had been reared in an entirely different environment and time alone could demonstrate to her that to survive in the West a man must be his own law to a great extent. Only the stoutness of his heart and strict adherence to the code would suffice. Honesty, industry and courage were essential, but above all stood the ability to hold whatever prestige and property he had earned.

The words of his father remained with Kent, and the more he pondered them the stronger their significance became. He had never thought it courageous to flee. Now he saw that, with all the odds in his favor, a gunfight assumed the level of a boxing bout between an unbeatable champion and a novice. There could be no glory in winning, no honor. And so, one day a month after the shooting, he rode to Elkhorn to find Ellen and tell her of his decision to leave and to beg for a word which would let him hope that some day when he had established himself he might dare send for her.

He stopped at a store to make a purchase and the proprietor offered a bit of news. "Reckon we're goin' to loose our schoolma'am. Ronnie just bought three tickets for the mornin' stage. They're leavin' with Syd Harper. Too bad. Ellen was sure a good teacher. My kids are crazy about her."

Kent left the store in a daze. She had told him she would leave if he fought with Harper, but he had hoped that the threat would be forgotten when the thing blew over. As he stood there absently shaping a cigarette, he saw her cross the street and enter the house where she and Ronnie lived. He dropped the cigarette and strode after her.

Ronnie opened the door to his knock and stood there regarding him coldly. "I'd like to speak to Ellen for a moment," said Kent Bradford.

"She's not in."

"Yes, she is, Ronnie."

"Not to you, she isn't. You got a lot of gall, Bradford, calling after what she told you."

Kent felt anger rising in him, but he answered calmly enough. "Ronnie, you're a man; you ought to understand. I could have killed Harper but I didn't. I only shot the gun out of his hand. Then he

pulled a Derringer on me. What was I supposed to do then?"

"Wasn't your fault you didn't kill him," sneered Ronnie. "You can't tell me that a man shooting for his life would try to hit the other fellow's gun. You read about that kind of marksmanship, but you never see it. Personally, I think your skill has been overrated. You've just been plain lucky."

Kent simply stared at him. This was the raw, inexperienced youth talking—a youth secure in the knowledge that no harm could come to him while his sister was within earshot.

Ronnie grew uneasy under the steady scrutiny. "What are you looking at?"

"A rare specimen of the jackass that walks on his hind legs," answered Kent quietly. "Ronnie, you're safe enough from me; but if you ever come face to face with a real killer, don't taunt him about his skill."

He turned and walked swiftly away.

Early the next morning he rode again to town. The stage was outside the station. Kent dismounted near it and stood at a corner of the building, his face hard and inscrutable. Presently Ellen and Ronnie and Syd Harper came up, Ronnie carrying the baggage, Ellen walking besides Syd, who was pale of face and evidently still weak.

Kent watched them steadily and the girl, catching his gaze, flushed and turned her head. She helped Syd into the coach and stepped in after him, taking a place on the far side. Ronnie tossed the baggage to the top of the coach, gave Kent a scowling glance, and followed. The stage was off in a cloud of dust without even a backward glance from any of the three.

Kent remained there for some minutes, still poker-faced and cold, until the tumult within him broke its bonds and all the anguish and despair bespoke itself in a harsh, "Hell!" Leaving his horse, he went to the nearest saloon and bought a quart of whiskey, and spent the rest of the morning in a silent and thorough debauch. Men came into the place, took one look at his scowling face and hastily left again. The bartender didn't have to tell them that Kent Bradford was in a dangerous mood.

At noon, Kent staggered to his horse, lifted himself into the saddle and rode far out into the hills. In a little glade where he and Ellen had spent many a happy moment he dropped the reins, slid to the ground and fell on his face in the cool grass.

It was dusk when he got up, cold sober but sick of heart. His jaw was set determinedly and his eyes blazed with purpose. He rode to the ranch, packed some treasured possessions and went to bed. In the morning he sought out his father.

"I'm goin' to do what you advised," he said quietly. "I'm goin' away to some place where nobody knows me. I'm goin' to dodge trouble. I'll shoot if I have to, but I'll keep on shootin' to miss."

The two men looked at each other long and hard. "You'll need money," said the elder Bradford.

Kent shook his head. "I've enough. Don't worry; I'm not goin' wrong. But I'm goin' to find some place where I don't need eyes in the back of my head."

Their hands met in a long grip. "You'll write to your mother?"

Kent nodded and turned away. Hazing the pack horse before him, he rode from the ranch.

III

The Bald-Headed Man

HE FOLLOWED the stage road north to Junction City and there made inquiries regarding the three travelers; but Junction City was a large place on the Butterfield stage route with several lines radiating from it and he received conflicting information. One agent thought the party had gone west, another had the impression that they had gone east. Kent gave up the vague idea of pursuit with a feeling that was akin to despair. Hope dies hard. Even though his common sense told him it would do him no good to find Ellen, he wanted to see her again, to tell her of his new resolve and his determination to go through with it regardless of her feelings toward him.

He headed westward for a short distance, then cut north into New Mexico. There he got a job on a ranch near a little town called Sabado and, mixing an expert knowledge of cattle with a deal of hard work, soon established himself in the confidence of the owner.

His rapid advancement invoked some jealousy on the part of his fellow cowboys, but in keeping with his resolve Kent did not permit this to ruffle him. His failure to resent covert insults invited plainer ones, and at times the fight to keep his temper was a hard one. Particularly was this so in the case of the foreman, a big, hard, capable man named Wentworth, who recognized in Kent's ability a threat to his own job. He rode Bradford unmercifully and assigned to him all the disagreeable tasks which had to be done. Kent's slightest mistakes were brought to the attention of the boss, and when Wentworth ran out of complaints he invented them.

The crisis came at last, as Kent knew it must sooner or later. A piece of quicksand had been fenced off and it was Kent's duty to see that this wire remained in good repair. One noon he returned from Sabado with a wagonload of supplies to find the boss wrathfully waiting for him. During the night a section of the fence had been trampled down and two of the outfit's prize bulls had become mired. A rider had found them that morning and had managed to drag one out, but the other was so firmly mired that it had had to be destroyed.

Kent listened tight-lipped while the Old Man bawled him out for not taking better care of the fence, then got his horse and rode to the place. New wire had been strung, but he saw that the break had occurred at a point which he had inspected the evening before and had found in good condition. He returned to the home ranch and went to the scrap pile, where he found the wire which had been replaced. It had been cut with pliers, not broken. Angry to the core, he strode into the mess shack and directly to Wentworth.

"Reckon you know that wire was cut," he said tightly.

"You're crazy!" Wentworth told him.

"If you inspected it when the line rider told you it was down, you'd have seen it was cut. If you didn't, you're a hell of a foreman."

Wentworth pushed back his chair and got to his feet. "You tellin' me I don't know my business?"

"Your business is to get rid of me," Kent told him quietly, "and I'd say you know that too danged well. Wentworth, I'm sayin' you cut that wire yourself."

"Why, you damned meddlin' pilgrim!" exploded Wentworth, and swung a fist which, if it had landed, must have knocked Kent through the wall.

It didn't land. Kent, anticipating it, sidestepped and threw a right of his own which caught the foreman squarely on the chin and knocked him over his chair. As he went down, his hand found the gun which had been hanging in its belt on the back of the chair.

"Don't try it!" warned Kent sharply, but Wentworth was beyond reasoning. Not only had he been exposed before the crew, but also he had been humiliated by a man who heretofore had been the object of their scorn. To give him his due, he had no intention of shooting Kent. A shot close to the latter's head should be sufficient to cow that brash young man. But Kent did not know this and as Wentworth jerked up the gun his own right hand crossed his body in that magically swift draw which these men had never seen before.

Some of them declared afterwards that they didn't see it even then. One moment Kent stood erect and poised, his hands at his sides, and the next a gun was spitting flame and lead. Wentworth dropped his gun with an involuntary cry of surprise and pain and reached over to grip his dangling, mutilated wrist with his free hand. And before he had completed the action, Kent's gun was back in its holster.

"Wentworth," he said coldly, "you're a fool. I don't want your job and never did. As for the rest of you—" he turned to survey them— "you're almost as foolish as he is. You might have known that when a fellow swallows the stuff you've been handin' out it's because he's got a good reason for it. Now if any of you feel like takin' this up where Wentworth left off—with fists or guns or tiddleywinks—I'll be around this place for ten more minutes."

Then he turned and walked out of the mess shack.

Packing his possessions was a matter of a few minutes, and at the end of the time specified he started away from the ranch driving the packhorse before him and without even telling the boss good-bye. As he was passing the mess shack a man came out and intercepted him. Kent eyed him narrowly, but the fellow had no appearance of belligerency about him and when he halted by Kent's horse there was only friendliness and respect in his eyes.

"Jest wanted to tell you," he said, "that I'm plumb ashamed of myself. I shore had you sized up wrong, Bradford. You feel like shakin' hands?"

Kent shook his hand and rode on. The incident increased his bitterness at having to leave a place which he had come to like, but he realized that the showdown had been inevitable. He wondered if it would be the same the next time he stopped, and renewed his resolve to keep away from gunplay except as a last resort. But no more insult would he take. Turning the other cheek, he had learned, merely made the other fellow bolder.

He rode leisurely northwestward, picking up supplies at the occasional towns through which he passed. There were ranches where he might have secured employment, for roundup time was coming on, but he pushed on with the idea of continuing to California. He was destined to get no farther than the foothills of Nevada.

Riding through these in the cool of an evening, he came to a path branching off from the well worn pack trail he was following. Modoc was the next town, and he had planned to continue riding until he reached it; but now he drew rein and considered. He would reach Modoc after nightfall and accommodations might not be easy to secure. Perhaps it would be better to camp out this night. The woods into which the little path disappeared looked inviting and he finally turned into the path. He had not gone a mile when he suddenly emerged on a barren slope pitted with disused mining shafts and containing a few deserted buildings. The place was drab and uninviting, and Kent made a wry grimace as he surrendered hope of finding a cool and comfortable camping site. However, when he dismounted and looked about he discovered that what had once been the mess shack was sound and clean, with a good cook stove in working order and a bunk behind a partition and he decided to spend the night here.

He packed his gear to the little room behind the partition, led the horses to a draw where he found water and grass, then returned to the shack, cooked and ate a good supper and turned in. He fell asleep almost at once.

He awoke to the soft plop of hoofs outside the shack and lay there listening. The horse stopped at the door and he heard the creak of saddle leather as the rider dismounted. Then the door opened and somebody entered. A moment later dim light showed through the doorway at the foot of the bunk and Kent knew the newcomer had lighted a lantern.

Kent's first thought was that somebody had been using the place as living quarters, but then he remembered that there were no supplies of food and bedding in the shack as would have been the case in that event. So instead of announcing his presence he remained quiet. The man on the other side of the partition walked slowly up and down the floor, stopping occasionally at the outside doorway, and presently Kent heard another horse approach and halt at the shack. The lowered voice of its rider came as he was dismounting.

"Think it's safe to burn that lantern?"

"Safe enough. Nobody ever comes here. Anyhow, we've got to use it. Come along and I'll show you that place I told you about. It's made to order, but you couldn't find it unless you knew where it is. Leave your horse here."

They moved away from the shack and Kent got up and stole to the outer doorway. He could see the lantern bobbing along some fifty feet to his right. After a while it disappeared beyond a building and he went back to his bunk. He did not know how long they would be gone, and moving all his gear would take time. The fact that they had left their horses saddled would indicate that their visit would not be a long one, and if he kept quiet they were not likely to detect his presence. One of them,

he decided, had found a vein of gold or silver that had been overlooked and was showing it to the other. This would explain their secrecy.

After a while they returned and halted outside the doorway to talk. Kent could not hear what they said, and presently one of them mounted and rode away. The other came into the shack and Kent stole to the doorway and chanced a glance into the other room. The man had raised the globe of the lantern and was about to blow out the flame. He held his hat in the hand which had raised the globe and Kent saw a smooth-shaven face and a head as devoid of hair as were his cheeks. The flame leaped and died, and in the ensuing darkness Kent heard him hang the lantern on a nail and leave the building. Again came the soft beat of hoofs and then silence. Kent went back to bed and this time slept through until daylight.

It was mid-morning when he rode into the mining town of Modoc. It appeared to be a thriving community of considerable size, with several stores, a stage station and a new brick bank. He drew rein at a hitching-rail outside one of the stores and swung to the ground, pausing there to roll and light a cigarette. It was his intention to replenish his supplies and push on westward. He blew out the match, broke it and dropped it into the dust and flashed a casual glance across his saddle at the store. And as he did so, two persons came out of the building, and at sight of them his heart missed a beat and for a moment his brain went numb.

One of them was Syd Harper; the other was Ellen Blake!

IV

Deep Water

KENT'S first reaction was shock—shock so strong as to obliterate surprise at seeing her here. In the few months since last he had looked into her face Ellen had aged ten years. Her eyes held a haunted, worried expression, and there were shadows under them. The brow which he remembered as soft and smooth now showed tiny lines of anxiety. There was a downward droop at the corners of the mouth which in the past had smiled so readily. Her whole attitude suggested worry, anxiety, fear.

They had not noticed him and as they descended to the sidewalk he bent his head and busied himself with a latigo strap. From the far side of the hitching-rail came her voice, lowered but intense. "You *can* do something about it. He spends his time in your Palace. He'll listen to you."

Harper answered smoothly. "My dear girl, you're mistaken. Ronnie's young and headstrong; he'll listen to nobody. If you can't do anything with him, I certainly can't."

"You can refuse to serve him drinks, refuse to let him gamble."

"On what grounds? Ronnie's free, white and old enough to look out for himself. Also he holds a position of some prominence—teller in the bank. I can't interfere with his freedom without a good excuse."

"It's just that you *won't* help me!" There was despair in Ellen's voice.

"I would if I could."

For a moment there was silence, then Kent heard the click of her heels on the plank sidewalk. He ventured a glance over his horse's back. Syd Harper was looking after her, a half-smile on his lips. Then he turned, for the first time aware of a presence near him. But Kent bent his head again and all that Harper saw was the broad-brimmed hat of a man engaged with his rig. He went on down the street and now it was Kent who did the gazing.

The old inscrutable poker expression had returned to Bradford's face. Ellen was suffering and because he loved her so well he suffered with her. Ducking under the rail, he started after her, saw her turn into a cottage, followed swiftly and rapped on the door. She answered at once and for several seconds stood there staring at him; and his heart leaped at the light which flamed in her eyes, even though it was quickly hidden.

"You followed me!" she accused sharply.

"Only to this cabin. Not to Modoc. I never dreamed you were here."

The ring of truth was in his voice, and after a moment she said, "Come in," and led the way to a little parlor and motioned to a chair. "You mean that you just happened to come to Modoc?"

"Yes. But I'm glad, for you're in trouble."

"What do you mean?"

He made a quick gesture. "I saw it at once. Your face—your manner. Ellen, what is it?"

She turned her head and he knew she was struggling with her emotion.

"It's Ronnie, isn't it? And Syd Harper."

She faced him then, her eyes flashing. "Kent, sometimes I've wished that—that you'd—"

"Killed him?"

"No! Oh, no! I shouldn't have said that."

"Ellen, listen. Back there in Elkhorn I saw what was happening. A tenderfoot kid like Ronnie's got no right to play with a professional gambler like Syd Harper. Syd was robbin' him blind, and when I tried to reason with him he got mad at me. He just wouldn't listen."

There was comprehension in her eyes now. "And so," she said tightly, "you ordered Syd out of town."

"Yes. When he refused to go—" Kent made a despairing gesture. "But that's over now. When he came so near to dying I made up my mind to quit gunfighting. I told myself I'd swallow insults or resent them with my fists. I came to Elkhorn that day to tell you so—and had to stand there and watch you ride away on the stage. It was hard, but I made up my mind to stick to my resolution. I knew I'd have to go somewhere where I wasn't known, and I followed you as far as Junction City. I lost you there.

"I got a job in New Mexico and was gettin' along fine until I tangled with the foreman of the outfit. I started out with my fists but had to finish with a gun. So I left there and started west for California. I rode into Modoc just in time to see you come out of the store, and I followed you here because I felt you needed me."

Her eyes warmed. "That was sweet of you, Kent. I—I think I understand a little better now. In the three months since we left Elkhorn I've watched Ronnie start downhill without being able to do a thing about it. I've wished sometimes that I was a man and had some of that uncanny skill of yours."

"The boy's been gamblin' with Syd?"

She nodded. "And drinking, too. You see, I'm being quite frank with you. And, Kent, it's a crime. Ronnie's a good boy, and Syd got him a job right away with the bank. It's a fine position and a responsible one, for the bank handles thousands of dollars buying gold and silver and shipping it to the mint. But if Ronnie doesn't straighten out he'll lose his job. No bank is going to keep a man who gambles and drinks."

Kent got up. "I reckon a heart-to-heart talk with Syd Harper might do some good."

"No!" She got up too and came over to where he stood. "Kent, you mustn't. This isn't Elkhorn; this is Syd's town. He owns the Silver Palace and several stores, and pays the marshal out of his own pocket. You mustn't antagonize him. Promise me you won't."

He looked down into her anxious eyes and sighed. "You win, Ellen; just like you always do. I won't cross him—until I get the goods on him. Then nothin' will stop me. Not even you, Ellen."

He left them, carrying with him the memory of her warm handclasp. Things were bad. Ronnie was teller in the bank and was gambling more money that he could afford to lose. It wasn't merely his job that was at stake, but his honesty and integrity and the pride of his sister. Getting Ronnie the job would make it appear as though Syd Harper were interested in the boy's welfare, but Kent knew that wasn't so or Syd would refuse to put him in the way of temptation. What then was Harper's object?

Kent went into the bank and to the teller's window. Ronnie was checking a deposit slip and did not glance up at once. He, too, had aged. There was a harassed air about him that showed even above his preoccupation with his task. Growing signs of dissipation were there too.

"Hello, Ronnie," said Kent quietly.

If he had fired a gun he could not have

startled the boy more. Ronnie's head jerked up and there was stark fear in his eyes. You!" he cried.

"Uh-huh. Small world, isn't it? I'd like change for this twenty." He pushed a goldpiece under the grille.

Ronnie fumbled with the change. "What are you doing in Modoc?"

"Just happened in. On my way to California. How's tricks?"

"Fine. Just fine. You—you're not staying?"

"Long enough to rest up my horses. Still think you can play poker?"

Ronnie flushed. "I'm lucky once in a while."

"Good thing. Fellow in your position's got to watch his step. Me, now, if I handled all this *dinero,* I'm afraid I'd begin to think in five or six figures instead of one or two. . . . Well, I'll be seein' you." He turned away and felt the boy's gaze on him clear to the door.

Outside the bank he shook his head. It *was* bad—even worse than he had thought. Ronnie was in up to his neck already.

He spent the day roaming about the town, mixing with the men in stores and saloons, saying little and listening much. He got the impression that Ronnie was liked and trusted, although there were a few shaded remarks which gave him to understand that some folk thought the boy was skating on thin ice. That evening he went to Harper's Silver Palace. It was a handsome layout, with a fifty-foot bar, a full quota of girls and all the games of chance from faro and poker to blackjack and roulette. In a little office off one end of the bar he saw Syd Harper seated at a desk working over some papers. Occasionally he came to the doorway and looked out over the crowd. He did not see Kent. Presently Ronnie came in, and Bradford quickly lowered his head on his arms as though asleep. He saw the boy glance quickly about him, then go into Syd's office and close the door behind him. . . .

"HELLO, Ronnie," greeted Harper. "What's on your mind?"

Ronnie spoke through tight lips. "Do you know that Kent Bradford's in town?"

Harper's eyes flickered. "No, I didn't know. What's he here for anyway?"

"Said he was on his way to California. Asked me if I still thought I could play poker and said something about a person who handled lots of money getting the habit of thinking in figures of five and six instead of one or two. Syd, do you think he . . . suspects?"

"Why should he? He doesn't know what's been going on."

"Just the same I'm worried. The first of the month is coming and I'm afraid they'll be checking up. I've got to cover that thousand I took until I can return it."

"A changed entry in the right place will do the trick."

Ronnie made a fierce gesture. "But I don't know a thing about bookkeeping. I'd make a botch of it. Syd, you've got to do it for me!"

"You're asking a lot, kid. You'd have to let me in some night—" He shook his head, frowning. "It's too risky."

"But it isn't! I go over occasionally at night to work. I have a key. You could come with me and nobody'd ever know it."

"Then there's the books," went on Syd. "They don't leave them lying around."

"They're in the small safe. I've watched them open it day after day and I've memorized the combination. I'll get the books."

Harper appeared to weigh the matter for a moment or two, then shrugged.

"All right. I'll do it for you, Ronnie. Tomorrow night be okay?"

"Yes. The sooner the better."

"Keno. Now how about a little game?"

"Suits me. If only I could get lucky I might win that thousand back from you. Then I could put it back and we wouldn't have to doctor the books. How about a shot from that special bottle of yours?"

V

In the Dead of Night

KENT watched the office, uneasiness strong within him. Syd Harper was working on the boy, getting him deeper in the mire of debt, forcing him closer to the inevitable.

The door opened and Harper appeared. Beyond him Kent could see Ronnie seated at a table nervously shuffling a deck of cards. Harper glanced towards a gaming table and nodded, and in response to the signal a man got up and went into the office with him. He was the bald-headed man Kent had seen in the cook shack of the deserted mine.

He got up and went to the bar, and as the attendant pushed a bottle towards him made a casual remark. "Looks like a little game goin' on in the office. Any chance of a stranger sittin' in?"

"Not a chance in the world, cowboy. Private party."

"Seems like I know the fellow who went in last. Who is he?"

"Baldy Benson, Prospector. Great fellow, Baldy. Used to be an actor but *Uncle Tom's Cabin* folded up on him last time they played Modoc and he had to go to work."

The hours passed. Long after midnight the office door opened and the three came out. Syd Harper's face was placid, Baldy Benson wore a satisfied grin, and Ronnie was tight-lipped and silent. They stopped at the bar for a final drink, and as Ronnie turned towards the door Syd gave him an encouraging slap on the shoulder. Then Syd turned and for the first time saw Kent. For a long moment the men exchanged hard stares, then Harper walked over to where Kent stood and spoke to him in a low voice.

"You ordered me out of your town and made it stick. Now I'm ordering you out of mine and I'll make that stick, too."

"You come gunnin' for me and I'll kill you," said Kent, and meant it.

Harper shrugged and walked away, and Kent went to the hotel and to bed. He got up early, had breakfast and went for a stroll about town. It was unlikely that Syd Harper was abroad this time of the morning, but if he was Kent wanted him to know that he was inviting a showdown. Failing to find Harper, he entered the Silver Palace. There were few men about and Kent saw through the open doorway that Syd was not in the office. He ordered a cigar and was lighting it when a big man came in, stood for a moment looking around, then walked up to Kent and addressed him.

"Your name Bradford?" Then as Kent answered in the affirmative he flipped back his coat and displayed a marshal's badge. "I've heard about you. Gunslinger ain't you?"

"I can shoot a little if I have to."

"Well, you won't have to if you move fast enough. We don't cater to killers here in Modoc. You be out of town by noon." He spoke loud enough so that those in the room could hear.

"I've never killed a man in my life," said Kent, "but I'm willing to try it if I'm prodded. You'll have to trot out a better reason than that to run me out of town."

"You got till noon," said the marshal and turned away.

Kent puffed slowly on the cigar. So that was the way of it. Syd Harper, not having the guts to go up against him again, had set his marshal on him. Kent felt disappointed, cheated; Harper had slipped away from him again. The old feeling of revulsion seized him and it occurred to him that he had not felt that way a moment before when he was searching for Harper. It was quite evident that his conscience would stand the killing of that sidewinder.

He tilted a chair against the wall and sat down. The marshal bought a drink for some friends, then went out. As he passed Bradford he said, "You better get goin'. Noon ain't far off."

When Kent finally went out he knew by the tension in the air that word of the marshal's ultimatum had spread. Men slanted furtive glances at him and he felt the stab of their stares after he had passed. The old sickness was on him again and it was an effort to walk without slouching. As he approached Ellen's cottage he saw the window curtain flutter and a moment later she came hurrying out. Her face was even more troubled than it had been.

"Kent," she said, "you're at it again. You told me you'd—"

"I know," he said wearily. "Syd ordered me out of town and I welcomed the chance to settle things with him; but he sent this marshal of his against me instead of comin' himself. I can't go now. You know why Ellen."

"Never mind that! Go away. Don't come back. Please, Kent!"

He regarded her steadily. "I can't. I've got to finish the thing this time. The thought of it sickens me, but I've got to go on with it."

She turned despairingly and went back into the house, and he continued on his way. At the end of the street he entered a little saloon and sat there until five minutes of twelve. Men came in, drank and went out again without saying a word. When he got up to go the place was deserted except for the bartender.

Once on the street the sickness vanished and that warm, comfortable glow stole over him. He felt relaxed, rested. He looked down the street. It was deserted but he knew that men watched from behind door and window. Then he saw a man come out of the Palace and glance about him, and even at the distance he recognized the marshal. He started towards him.

The marshal saw him coming but made no move for a full minute. Kent saw him glance in his direction several times, then shift his gaze to a spot diagonally across the street. Finally he began moving towards Kent. He walked slowly as though gauging the distance between them, and once more glanced across the street.

Kent read the look aright and felt anger stir within him. This was to be another crooked deal. His eyes, without seeming to do so, picked out the spot at which the marshal had glanced and saw the darkened doorway and the vague shape three or four feet beyond it. His mind stirred actively. This was a new angle. Which would make the first move?

The distance between them closed to fifty feet and Kent was nearly opposite the dark doorway. The marshal spoke loudly. "I gave you fair warnin', Bradford. You asked for it. Draw your iron, feller!"

Kent knew then. The marshal was to hold his attention. . . .

Never had his draw been so swift, never his subsequent action so deft and sure. That mathematical mind of his had calculated everything. As his gun leaped out his left foot struck the ground and he pivoted an exact eighty degrees and fired. And echoing the shot came another from the doorway, the lead gouging dirt from the middle of the road. Stumbling from the opening came a man to fall to his knees on the sidewalk, the gun in his hand only half raised.

Even before he emerged Kent pivoted again, his arm sweeping around with his turning body. Again the gun roared and the marshal, his Colt half out of its holster, gave a choking gasp and dropped the weapon, then sank to the ground as his shattered leg gave beneath him.

A quick leap took Kent to the front of a building where he crouched, waiting. For a few seconds there was no movement. Then a man came out of a store, both hands raised, and hurried to the side of the man on the opposite walk. Others came out, all with their hands in plain sight. The marshal lay on his back, groaning, and as though he had anticipated an emergency the town's doctor came running, black bag in hand.

Kent holstered his gun and walked up to the stricken marshal. A man was cutting away the leg of his trousers.

"You better tell Syd Harper to do his own chores after this," he told the man. "Outside of your playin' tool for him I got nothin' against you. Let this thing end right here."

He went to the hotel for dinner, noticing on the way a change in the attitude of the men he met. They nodded or spoke to him now, not trying to hide the respect they felt. At heart no man relishes a raw deal, and that this had been one was plain to all who had witnessed the encounter.

Although Kent went out of his way to look for him, he did not find Syd Harper until that night when he visited the Palace. Syd was seated in his office as was his custom, and Kent rounded the bar and spoke through the doorway. "The next time you try somethin' like that, Harper, I'm servin' notice that I'll hunt you down and finish what I started at Elkhorn. That's flat and final."

He went to a corner and found a chair, determined to put an end to Ronnie's gambling if he had to do it by force. But the hours slipped by without the boy putting in appearance, and shortly after mid-

night Kent left the Palace. Syd Harper, he took pains to notice, was still in his office.

A strange uneasiness prodding him, Kent walked down to the Blake cottage. There was a light in the front room, and on an impulse he passed through the gateway and moved silently to a window. Ronnie was not in the room. Ellen sat alone, reading, the worry in her face showing plainly under the yellow lamplight. As he watched, her glance left the book and went to the clock on the mantel, and he could almost hear her sigh.

He swore under his breath and turned away, intending to search the other gambling houses for the absent Ronnie. Then there came a sullen *boom!* which froze him in his tracks, ears straining, every nerve taut.

It wasn't a loud explosion; insistent would describe it better. It made itself felt in the slight tremor of the earth beneath him, in the rattle of the window, the vibration of the air. And in an instant he knew what it was.

He ran out through the gate and down the street towards the bank two blocks away. High heels were not made for sprinting and it seemed an age before he reached the brick building. It was dark and silent, although people were beginning to stir in the nearby houses and he could hear the thump of boots along the street. There was an acrid odor present which he knew was caused by burned explosive.

He turned into the passageway between bank and adjoining building and sped to the alley. Even as he reached it there came a flurry of hoofs and two horsemen, crouching over the necks of their mounts, flashed by. His Colt flashed out and leveled and he checked the release of the hammer just in time. The one at whom he instinctively aimed might be Ronnie!

His horse was in front of the Silver Palace and he started for it, shouting answers to the excited questions which were flung at him as men began to arrive. In the act of vaulting into the saddle he stopped and dropped the reins. He just had to be sure. Running into the Palace, he sent a quick glance into the little office. Syd was behind his desk, a cigar in his mouth, working with some books. Still letting others do his dirty work, thought Kent bitterly. Ronnie and another, no doubt. The bald-headed man?

He rode swiftly along the street. The door of Ellen's cottage was open and she stood framed in the light from within. He rode his horse into the yard and up to the steps. "Ronnie in?" he asked.

"No, Kent, he isn't. What's happened? I thought I heard—"

"You did. The bank. Two men."

"Oh, *no!*" There was utter despair in her voice and she leaned against the doorframe for support.

"They headed east. I'm going after them. If Ronnie is one of them I'll do all I can to help him." He wheeled his horse, but she halted him.

I'm going with you! She was standing erect now.

"No, Ellen. You—"

"Saddle my horse for me. I won't be more than a minute."

He made no further protest. Perhaps it was better that she see the thing through to the finish. Three minutes later they rode together into the night.

VI

A Bullet Strikes

KENT set a fast pace, following the road which led eastward from Modoc. Behind them they left confusion, with men running in search of horses and shouting questions. A few had already taken up the pursuit and Kent followed close behind them. the meaning of that meeting at the deserted mine two days before suddenly clear to him.

For the first few miles the country was open and, since it was moonlight, it was safe to assume that the bandits had kept to the main road. But when they began climbing into the hills, patches of timber were encountered. At each of these a couple of the pursuers dropped out to conduct a search, thus permitting the main body to continue without loss of valuable time. At

last they reached the trees through which ran the path to the mine.

"I'll take this one," Kent called out, and motioned to Ellen to rein into the narrow trail. He followed closely and the others spurred on. Once among the trees he took the lead, walking his horse, and as the hoofbeats died in the distance she spoke.

"We're not searching very carefully. Why do you stick to the trail?"

"Because it's goin' to take us straight to them," he told her, and went on to acquaint her with the details of the meeting at the old mine. "I thought then they'd found a vein of gold or silver which they aimed to work, but now I've a hunch that one of them wanted to show the other a safe place to hide the money from the bank. One of them I saw. He was the man they call Baldy Benson. I don't know who the other was."

"When was this?" asked Ellen tensely.

"Night before last; Tuesday."

He heard her sigh of relief. "Then it wasn't Ronnie. Tuesday was the only night this week he stayed home."

They continued at a walk, the sound of their horses' hoof falls barely audible. "Has Ronnie ever gone to the bank after hours?" he asked.

"Several times, especially near the first of the month." She went on swiftly, hopefully. "Maybe he was working there tonight and was surprised by the robbers before he could give the alarm!"

He agreed with her promptly because he knew how much she wanted this reassurance. "It could be; I never thought of that angle. Reckon I should have looked inside the bank, but I was so sure Syd Harper was in on the robbery that I went straight to the Palace to see if he was still there."

"Was he?"

"Yes—worse luck! Right at his desk in the office where he'd been the whole evenin'."

"If he was at the Palace he couldn't have had anything to do with the robbery."

"If he was in Patagonia I'd still believe he was behind it," said Kent flatly. "But he's too smart a gambler to play against the percentage, and he's got too much at stake in Modoc to risk gettin' caught in somethin' like this. Maybe he wasn't in the actual robbery, but I'd bet my bottom dollar that he engineered the whole scheme. . . . Now we'd better tie here and Injun up to the mine on foot. You can stay with the horses."

"I've got to know the truth. I'm going with you."

He faced her in the gloom. "You know what you're apt to find. There's a chance, a big chance, that Ronnie's in on it."

"I know. But I'd die—just waiting here."

He turned at once and led the way along the path, and presently they glimpsed the gray barrenness of rock and the ghostly outline of buildings in the moonlight, and halted at the very edge of the trees.

They could see one end of the mess shack and the side which contained the door. The end wall showed plainly, but most of the side was in deep shadow. Kent, peering through the darkness, made out two vague shapes which he decided were horses.

"Look!" whispered Ellen and gripped him by an arm.

He turned his head slightly towards the left. A man had come from the building where the lantern had disappeared two nights before, and was half walking, half running toward the mess shack. He appeared no more than a shadow, his features entirely indistinguishable.

"Wait here!" ordered Kent quietly, and started towards the fellow. His Colt slipped smoothly into his hand, the hammer clicked beneath his thumb. But even as he responded to the habit of years he was telling himself that he must not shoot. That man might be Ronnie.

His spur scraped rock and the other heard, as Kent knew he must sooner or later. The shadow stopped abruptly, stood rigid for a moment, then a stab of flame cut the darkness and Kent heard the twang of a bullet. A little exclamation reached him from behind and he turned his head to see Ellen following at his heels. "Lie down!" he ordered sharply, and broke into a run.

Once more the fellow fired and once more he missed. Then he resumed his running towards the shack and Kent, assuming

that he would certainly mount one of the horses, prepared to drop the animal in its tracks. To his surprise the man ducked into the mess shack.

Kent sped onward, expecting to see another flash and perhaps feel the impact of the bullet. Yet for some reason the fellow did not fire and Kent brought up outside the doorway and pressed close to the log wall. There was a movement behind him and he felt Ellen's warm breath on his neck. He extended his left arm as a signal that she was not to pass him.

From within the shack came the murmur of voices, low-pitched, intense. Not a word could he distinguish, but the low tones suggested an argument of some kind. He spoke in a whisper to Ellen. "Stay outside, whatever you do. I mustn't be distracted worryin' about you. Do as I tell you. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Here are some matches. There's a lantern inside—I hope. Back away and circle around to the other side of the door where there's no chance of your bein' hit. When I pass the lantern out to you, light it and look for a pole. Put the lantern on the end of it and push it through the door. Set it on the floor, but don't show even a finger inside the shack. Got it?"

"Yes!"

He heard her move away and presently caught sight of her small form making the circle. In one swift movement he was through the doorway. Hidden by the darkness he knelt and removed his spurs, putting them into a pocket. The voices behind the partition had ceased and it became too quiet.

He got up and silently moved across the floor to where he had seen the bald-headed man hang the lantern. His groping fingers found it, lifted it from the nail. Like a shadow he stole back to the wall near the doorway. Through the entrance he could just make out Ellen's form, an arm extended as far as she dared.

He passed the lantern to her, and as he withdrew his arm there came a spurt of flame from the partition door and lead scorched his sleeve. Quickly he leaped to his right, crouched, with gun leveled. Again came that lance of flame and a slug smacked into the logs where a moment before he had been standing.

With iron determination he withheld his fire, depressing the muzzle of the Colt towards the floor. No matter what happened he dared not answer that shot. The reputation he had established throughout a lifetime held him in the grip of fear. He had never missed; perhaps he *couldn't* miss. And the man might be Ronnie Blake.

Slowly he retreated to the corner of the room opposite that in which was the partition door, knowing that the other could not possibly see him, and for some tense seconds there was absolute silence. Then he saw the light of the lantern come bobbing towards the shack. It stopped a yard or so outside the door, then passed smoothly through the doorway on the end of the pole. Before the men behind the partition could act, Ellen deftly placed it on the floor where if they wished to shoot it out they must expose themselves to Kent's fire. The pole was withdrawn and the yellow rays spread over the floor in a dying circle, the outside rim of which just reached the partition doorway.

Kent spoke sharply. "You fellows can't get away. Those shots are goin' to draw the posse, and the quicker you surrender the better. Come out backwards and with your hands in the air."

More whispers from behind the partition, one voice hoarse and excited almost to the point of hysteria, the other even and sharp and with the hint of threat in it. Then, with dramatic suddenness, a man stepped through the doorway.

The weak lantern rays reached only to his feet, and Kent could not see the upper part of his body. But he could sense desperation in the man's movements, feel the burning intensity of the gaze that sought to penetrate the dense darkness which hid him.

The fellow's gun blazed and lead thudded into the wall to one side of Kent. Another shot sang over his head, a third dug into the floor at his feet. He fought savagely to keep his Colt pointing at the floor. The man was moving steadily forward, shooting at every stride. It didn't seem possible that he could miss at such short range. And as he advanced, the lan-

tern light traveled slowly up his body. If only Kent could see his face!

Bradford crouched like a cornered puma, his gun still determinedly depressed, watching, waiting. Again the other's Colt blazed and Kent gasped as the bullet burned his neck. The sweat came out on his face; he had to shoot! Had to shoot or be shot. Just one more step and he would know!

The fellow stopped abruptly, the line of light chest high. His hand held the gun rigidly at the level of his waist and he was peering over the lantern at the shadowy shape in the corner of the room. Kent saw the muzzle of the weapon move slightly and knew with the instinct of the marksman that the next shot would not miss. With a groan he snapped up his Colt, the hammer tense under his thumb. It would be close; he must shoot to kill! He let the hammer slip and as he did so the other suddenly stooped and the light fell full on his face.

It was Ronnie!

Only nerves completely synchronized with a quick-thinking brain could have done what Kent did then. The hammer had been released. In perhaps a tenth of a second it would send lethal lead into the body of the boy. But in that tenth of a second a message was flashed to the muscles of hand and wrist and was obeyed. The gun jerked sidewise, roared throatily, and Kent heard the bullet tear through the partition.

It was then that Ronnie's nerve broke. Or, perhaps, it was then that he really found it. He straightened and the gun at his side dropped downward until it pointed at the floor. "Kill me!" he cried. "Kill me and get it over with!"

But even before Ellen could utter her anguished "Ronnie!" they heard a thud behind the partition. Ronnie jerked about as though motivated by a spring and Kent straightened to stare past him. On the floor, just within the circle of light, a hand extended beyond the doorway, its fingers gripping a sixgun. As they watched, the fingers twitched spasmodically, then slowly relaxed and the Colt dropped loosely from them.

Ronnie stared a moment, then turned his face to look at Kent, and in the boy's eyes Kent could read astonishment, awe, and—yes—unutterable relief. "Thank God!" he breathed; then bowed his head and sank to the floor, sobbing.

Ellen flashed through the doorway and dropped to her knees beside him, hugging him to her, talking and crying: but Kent strode straight to the partition, seized the lax hand and dragged the inert body into the lighted room. With a quick flip he rolled the man on his back. The eyes rolled upward and the jaw sagged gruesomely but there could be no mistake.

"Good Lord!" he swore softly. "Syd Harper!"

VII

In the Clear

KENT turned and strode to where Ronnie still knelt and shook the boy by the shoulder. "Ronnie! You've got to snap out of it. A whole bunch of men'll be here soon and we've got to know where we stand. I want the whole story and I want it straight!"

Ronnie looked up at him, his face drawn, the horror still in his eyes.

"I can't. Not now."

"You've got to. Give it to us straight and from the beginnin'. Never mind Ellen. What she must be thinkin' can't be any worse than the truth."

Ronnie bowed his head, fought for a moment with his emotion, then spoke.

"It started at Elkhorn. With Syd. I'd never gambled before and the fever got me, I won at first, then lost. The first thing I knew I owed Syd more than I could pay. He told me about this job and urged me to come to Modoc with him. Ellen didn't want to change schools, but when you shot Syd she agreed to go with me.

"We came here and Syd got me the job at the bank. I made good money and began playing again. I lost and lost, it seemed that I just couldn't win. Syd told me that I could borrow a little from the bank, that I was bound to win sooner or later. "I—" He stopped, his cheeks burning with shame.

"Go on," said Kent grimly. "You stole from the bank."

Ronnie wet his lips. "Yes. A thousand dollars. But I swear I intended to return it as soon as I won. But I couldn't win. The best I could do was break even. The first of the month was coming and I knew there'd be a checkup. I told Syd about it, begged him to lend me the money to repay the bank. He told me that all I had to do was change an entry in the books. I don't know anything about bookkeeping and at last I—I asked him to do it for me." He paused for a moment, his face contorted with agony. "God! What a fool I was!"

"We all are at times. Go on."

"Tonight I went over to the bank and when Syd came to the back door I let him in. He had a satchel with him, but I didn't pay any attention to it at the time. The books were in a small safe and I knew the combination. I was on my knees working on it when I looked up and saw Syd standing there with a gun pointed at me. He told me he was going to rob the bank and that I was to be blamed for it. He was cold and hard and I knew he wasn't joking. He made me lie on the floor while he took tools from the satchel and started working on the big safe. When he had planted the charge he made me light the fuse. The doors were blown open and I had to help him stuff the money into the satchel. By that time I was in so deep I had to go on with it."

"But it wasn't you, dear!" cried Ellen. "He *made* you do it!"

"Yes. . . . He had horses outside, all saddled. He put a rope around my waist and dragged me after him. I had no gun. We came here and he tied me up back there behind the partition, and gagged me. Then he took the satchel and went outside and after a while I heard shooting and knew we'd been discovered. I—I nearly died right there."

Ellen now sat beside him, holding one of his hands tightly clasped between hers. Kent had squatted on his heels and was busy with a cigarette. Ronnie went on:

"He came back in and took off the ropes and told me that we were in it together and that we'd have to get out of it together. When that lantern was shoved into the room I knew it was the end. Then Kent ordered us to come out.

"Syd pushed a gun into my hand and said we'd make a break for it and that I was to lead the way. I was to come out shooting and if I didn't kill you he would, and me too." The boy closed his eyes and shuddered. "I know now he wanted me to be killed. He knew Kent never missed."

"He would have killed you himself in the end," said Kent harshly. "I see through it now, the whole damned clever scheme. But go on."

"You know the rest. I—I came out. Kent, I swear I didn't try to shoot you! I couldn't see you plainly and I tried to shoot every place but at you. And when you shot and missed me I knew you'd missed on purpose. I had my gun squarely on you, but I just couldn't fire. I yelled to Syd to go ahead and kill me, and then I heard him fall. The bullet that missed me had gone through the partition and killed him! When I realized that, I knew that God had directed your bullet and I felt as though the world had been lifted off my shoulders. I'll take my medicine; I'll go to jail and—"

"Quiet! They're comin'. Pull yourself together and leave everything to me." In the silence which followed they heard the thud of hoofbeats outside the shack. Kent got up.

"Don't say a word; just leave it to me. Understand?"

Ronnie nodded dumbly and Kent walked over to the lighted doorway.

Horses came clattering up and men slid from saddle to ground. "What's goin' on here?" demanded one of them. "What's the shootin' about?"

"You're too late for the party boys," Kent told them. "Ellen and Ronnie Blake are in here with me. Also one perfectly dead bank robber."

"What's that? You got one? Where is he?" They pushed by Kent and into the room, there to gaze at the stricken bandit in amazement.

"Syd Harper!" cried their spokesman. "Now that *can't* be! Dang it all, we left Syd behind in the Palace. Didn't we, boys?"

"Well, there he is," said Kent.

"But—but— Good gosh, man, it got *me* beat! Where's the other one?"

"There was only one thief to begin with."

"There were two. I seen 'em headin' out of Modoc myself."

"There were two riders but only one robber. You see, Ronnie went over to the bank after supper to work. Syd came to the back door and Ronnie, not suspecting a thing, let him in. Syd pulled a gun on him and made him lie down on the floor while he blew the safe. Then he made Ronnie go with him, aimin' to pin the robbery on him. Syd, you see, was supposed to be at the Palace."

"He *was!* I tell you, we *seen* him there!"

"I thought I did, too; but I didn't. The man we saw was Baldy Benson. He used to be an actor, you know. All he had to do was put on a black wig and mustache, touch up his face a bit, and get into a suit of Syd's clothes. Then he could sit there at the desk and look busy, and no matter what happened Syd'd have fifty witnesses who could take oath that he was at the Palace the whole evenin'."

"Well, I'll *be*!"

Kent told them what had happened at the shack, and there was a moment of astonished silence. Then one of them said, "You aim at an innocent man, miss him, and your bullet goes through a partition and kills a guilty one! And you say that's all there was to it. Hell's bells, Bradford, I've heard you spoke of as a man who couldn't miss, and now I believe it! But where's that money hid?"

"Syd came out of the buildin' about fifty yards from here. I reckon if you look hard enough you'll find the hidin' place. Maybe a trap door over an old shaft."

"Let's have that lantern and we'll look for it right now. And then we'll mosey back to Modoc and settle with Mr. Baldy Benson."

"Baldy Benson," said Kent quietly, "is probably far away by now and still makin' plenty tracks."

The man took the lantern, went over and examined the dead Harper, then shook his head and turned to Kent. "Bradford, I've seen you handle your hardware. I'm sayin' right now that the job of Modoc's marshal is yours for the askin'."

"He can't take it!"

It was Ellen who spoke. She was standing now, her head held high and soft lights playing in her eyes. "He's going back to Texas, to a town named Elkhorn, where he's going to be very busy running his father's ranch. And I'm going back there too and take my old job of teaching, if they'll have me."

"Ellen!" said Kent softly.

She returned his warm gaze steadily, a bit of color rising in her cheeks. "And Ronnie," she went on, "is going to stay here in Modoc and keep his job at the bank. Aren't you, Ronnie?"

The boy looked up, jaws set, eyes shining. "You just bet I am!"

The man sighed. "Your two goin' leaves Modoc the loser, but good luck to you. . . . Come on, boys; let's start lookin' for that *dinero*."

ONE day two months later, Kent rode into Elkhorn and dismounted at the store. As was the case the time when he watched Ellen ride away, he went into the store to make a purchase.

"That weddin' ring I ordered—has it come yet?"

The storekeeper sighed. "Yeah, it's here. Dang you, Kent Bradford! You fetch back our schoolma'am and she just about settles down on the job again when you up and marry her. Too bad. Ellen sure was a good teacher. My kids are crazy about her."

Keep the Axis on the run
Buy WAR BONDS and STAMPS

Duck Soup

By Lulita Crawford Pritchett

If there was one thing Puck liked more than to eat, it was to get a cowboy and a girl sewed up in a wonderful romance.

MIKE FLANNERTY, wizened cook at Towner's sawmill, swore at the potatoes that were sending up clouds of fragrant steam from the kettle. He swore at the beans. Then he opened the big oven and swore melodiously at two huge huckleberry pies as he lifted them onto a board shelf to cool. Swearing came natural to Mike. It was a sign of his good humor.

Two shadows that had been lurking near the doorway suddenly materialized into a tousle-topped, freckled-faced girl of about fourteen, and an impish looking elk. Both were sniffing hungrily. The girl was Puck Randall, tomboy daughter of old Rip, the cowman, and the critter was her pet, Joker. Puck was relieved to find Mike cheerful. She considered it safe to put in an appearance and hoped he had forgotten the unfortunate episode of their last meeting.

But the minute Mike clapped eyes on the two dusty tramps his whiskers bristled and he bellowed, "So it's you, dad blarst you! Git afore I tan your slippery hides!"

Mike must have been more attached to that sourdough jar than Puck had realized. On their visit a week ago Joker hadn't meant to get his head stuck in the jar and smash it against a tree. He'd only wanted to sample the sour dough. And he hadn't meant to bust Mike's best dishes. He couldn't help it if they came crashing about his ears when he nibbled the oilcloth along the kitchen shelf.

Mike threw the broom at his visitors, followed by the mop and a shower of stove wood. Joker skipped out of the way with a flirt of his impudent tail. Puck poked her head around the corner of the house and bargained: "No pie, no newspaper! And there's printed letters from the soldier boys."

Mike's wrinkled potato of a face sharpened eagerly. Puck knew she had him. Mike felt a fierce and fatherly interest in every Kettle Creek puncher who had hung up his spurs and gone to war. He would have mortgaged his hope of heaven to have been there with them. Ungraciously, he conceded the pie. "But I'll do the cuttin'," he warned, settling himself on his bench in the shade, "when I've found out if Longhorn Jones has shot down any more Jerrys and if Tex and Pieface and Shorty has got them measly slant-eyed coyotes on the run. And mind—no monkeyshines!"

Puck had no slightest intention of getting into trouble today. Every time she sneezed or took a deep breath she hurt. Darn the bronc that had pitched her into the fence and busted her rib! All summer she'd been doing a man's work, riding fence, running the sweep rake, branding calves and, when Rip was not around, breaking horses. She hadn't been doing so bad either till she'd forked that wall-eyed pinto. Rip had taped her up, scolded her with a twinkle in his eye, and ordered her to ride herd on the cook shack till she mended.

If there was anything Puck hated to do it was housework. So, today, feeling the need of comfort and company, she had decided to visit Tug Howarth, forest ranger. One thing about Tug, he couldn't cook. Therefore she'd managed to be at Towner's sawmill at noon. She could think of nothing more comforting than one of Mike's huckleberry pies. But for company, big six-foot, sandy-haired Tug Howarth couldn't be beat. Besides, she had important matters to talk over with him.

She fidgeted while Mike's crooked finger traveled slowly down the columns of print. Joker and she were both dribbling at the mouth with the tantalizing steam from the pies. She kept a weather eye on the door so the elk couldn't do any damage. It never occurred to her to watch the window. Her mind was busy with Tug.

Months ago, with the very first volunteers, Tug had gone to war. But after a while they'd sent him home, silent, ashamed—and sick. Sciatica had come back on him and doubled him up in those damp low climates. That spring blizzard years ago was to blame. Tug had worked too hard in the snow and ice trying to save some calves, and Doc had cussed him proper. Puck could barely remember. But ever since, he'd been strong and tough as an ox—till the Army sent him home.

And now after a few weeks in the mountains he was disgustingly healthy again and itched to get into the fight. But the military wouldn't let him and Tug felt disgraced and worthless. He took the hardest job he could find—guarding thousands of acres of timber which Uncle Sam was going to use for shipbuilding; and he fought fires, chopped brush, and brooded—and grew thinner and thinner.

Puck worried about him. He oughtn't to stay by himself so much. He ought to have a wife to cheer him and look after him. Puck meant to advise him this very day. All the way up the road she'd been cudgeling her brain to find some girl nice enough for him. Then, just before she turned off at the sawmill, a rattletrap truck passed her driven by Old Man Mitchell of the Blue Jay Mine. That made her think of Old Man's Mitchell's step-daughter, Docie.

Puck drew rein so sharply that Joker, who had been tagging too close to Prunes, the horse, bumped himself and in a temper turned and lashed out with his small hoofs. Puck gave herself a mental kick for hitching Tug's and Docie's names together. She didn't want Tug mixed up with that Blue Jay outfit.

There was something screwy about those folks. Last spring the old man and a fellow named Coke Blevins had bought up the claim over in that brush hollow a mile or so north, and it was rumored they were getting good stuff out of the tunnel. But they didn't want anything to do with other people and had big signs "Keep Out" all over their place. Old-timers loafing around Pop Haggerty's store 'lowed there'd never

been a snifter of any mineral in that Blue Jay tunnel, but Coke Blevins smiled down his thin nose at them and showed them the ore right there in his pocket.

"You just wasn't smart enough to know molybdenum when you seen it," he said. Dark and gaunt he was, with quick black eyes, and anyone could see he was the brains and boss of that outfit. He was buying up the water rights in the canyon below, which proved he really had something. And folks began to nod their heads and say he'd struck a stray vein like the big Gold Horn Mine down at Red Dirt that was a beehive of activity these days producing strategic minerals.

Docie cooked for the two men. Pop Haggerty said Docie was Coke's girl and he was so jealous of her he wouldn't even let her come to town. Well, he could keep her as far as Puck was concerned—no matter if she was pretty with soft dark curls at the nape of her neck, soft brown eyes to match, and dimples that chased themselves in and out of her cheeks. She wasn't good enough for Tug.

Puck had just reached this conclusion for the second time when *crash, clatter!* a noise from the kitchen reared her and Mike to their feet. Through the door their horrified eyes saw a sticky mess of pastry upside down upon the floor. Joker's neck had been long enough to reach the shelf. Wedged by his middle in the window, he was trying to kick his way to the ground. He succeeded, muzzle dripping with red juice, and flakes of piecrust on his ears just as Mike Flannerty let out an Irish warwhoop and grabbed for his shotgun.

Puck had sense enough to jump on Prunes and whale him into action. Mike wouldn't care whose hide he peppered. *Spat!* went the shot among the trees. With a flirt of his white rump the elk disappeared over the hill. When Puck caught up with him he was licking his lips with satisfied grunts.

"Do*ggone* you!" she panted, holding her cracked rib and wishing she had Mike's tongue for cussing. "Now look what you've done! Where'll we get our dinner?"

Joker's rascally eyes glittered. He thought he was smart, even had a notion of going back. If he did he'd be elk stew! After all, she didn't want him shot. She tied her lariat to him, and taking a twist around the saddle horn hauled him stiff-legged up the road, which was hard on her lariat. She'd got to get her a new one; some of the strands on this were busting. "You better walk while you can," she advised gloomily. "After you eat Tug's cookin' you may not be able to!"

THERE was nothing to do but go on to the ranger's camp, for nobody else lived up on the mountain—except that Blue Jay bunch. The road circled into Wyoming before it passed another habitation. Puck's eyes narrowed. Why not eat at the Blue Jay? Docie Mitchell had brought a swell chocolate cake to the community picnic last spring before Coke had made her stay home. Puck's empty stomach set up a clamor. Pop Haggerty claimed he'd been shot at when he passed their place one day looking for a lost horse. Of course Pop was sour on them because they did all their trading at Red Dirt instead of at his store. "Dunno what they want of so much grub nohow," he grumbled. "They're allus a-peggin' over to Red Dirt." Rip Randall had said, "Folks has got a right to trade where they please and also to pertect their property—specially in wartimes." And he had ordered Puck to stay away from the Blue Jay.

But he wouldn't want her to starve to death!

Half a mile up the road she turned into the brushy hollow where the Blue Jay cabin stood. Boldly she opened the barbed wire gate and started in. Shucks, those signs weren't meant for a friendly caller. She'd bet Docie'd be glad to see. . . .

Zing! A bullet, uncomfortably close, whined past her ear.

Puck got out of there mighty sudden. From the safety of the ridge she looked back. No life nor movement was visible around the squatty brown shack in the gully. She was more scared than she cared to let on even to Joker, and she was good and glad to reach Tug's camp a short time later. His lookout station was right on top of the peak, but he had a little tent down

in a grassy glade where he lived, and he was starting to build a cabin.

"Howdy, kid!" Big, sandy-haired Tug was glad to see her. She decided to say nothing about being shot at. He might forbid her coming up on the mountain. "'Light and have some soup!" he invited.

That's what Puck had been afraid of. Tug's soups were—well, no wonder he was growing gaunter day by day! But a person as near to starving as Puck couldn't be choosey. She sniffed at the bowl he filled for her. "Say, Tug, what kind of soup is this?"

"Rock soup, kid. First you boil some nice round rocks, and then you add whatever you got—a few spuds, or some onions or carrots."

"Tastes more like you'd boiled a rubber boot," said Puck honestly.

"It does have sort of a far-away flavor," agreed Tug with a wry grin. "Try a biscuit."

Puck took one of the dingy grayish dough balls and tried to pinch it. Talk about rock soup! She'd have to have a gizzard to eat that. When Tug had his back turned she tossed it to Joker, who rolled it around in his mouth a while, then left it in a bunch of grass.

"Have another biscuit, kid," urged the hospitable Tug. "Gosh, there's plenty of 'em!"

Puck squirmed. She didn't want to hurt Tug's feelings, so she took the biscuit, put it on a boulder and socked it with a stone. If she could get it down by pieces. . . . "Ain't you got any canned goods?" she inquired.

Tug, gnawing at his bread like a squirrel chiseling into a pine cone, shook his head. "I had some," he said, "but lightning struck the station one day and punctured every can. That's why I'm campin' down here. 'S funny."

Puck could see nothing funny about it. Tug was starving to death! His pants hung on him, and his eyes looked hollow and bloodshot. They roved restlessly over the dark acres of timber entrusted to his care.

"Country's dry as a chip," he muttered. "Be a bad time for a fire."

Puck too stared upon the forest. Better to keep her mind off what was in her mouth if she could. A heap depended on Tug. There were a thousand war needs for the lumber he was guarding. S'pose he got sick?

"Tug," she said abruptly, "you got to find you a wife."

"Huh?"

"Someone who can cook. There's a lot o' nice girls. That teacher at Mud Flats, or the sawyer's daughter, or—"

Tug's ears turned an angry red. "Not me!"

Puck eyed him severely. "Don't be a ninny. This marryin' business is simple. One party furnishes what the other party needs. Lord knows you need a cook, and I'll betcha there's some girl that just needs a big hunk o' beef like you to look after her."

"That's where you're dead wrong," growled Tug. "She ain't got no use for me a-tall."

"Then you've already picked out a girl!"

Tug hurled the rest of his biscuit at a stump. "I got to get to work."

"Who is she, Tug?"

But he was striding for the lookout station and didn't seem to hear her. Puck scrambled after him, eaten with curiosity. "How do you know she doesn't like you? Who is she, Tug? Maybe I could—"

The ranger, crossing a muddy place by the spring, carefully stepped over a loose slab of spruce bark in the trail. Puck kicked it out of the way. Then she stared. The bark had covered a small footprint with a miniature half-moon of a heel—a woman's track. And there was only one female in Kettle Creek who didn't know better than to wear high-heeled slippers in the mountains.

"Docie Mitchell!" she gasped.

Tug jerked around, a hang-dog look on him as if he'd been caught stealing chickens.

"What was Docie doing here?" blurted Puck.

Tug wiped his sweaty face. "That's kind of a purty little track," he said lamely. "Feller gits lonesome seein' nothin' but bear tracks and fox tracks and coyote tracks." Sheepishly, yet with a stubborn set to his jaw, he hunted up the bark and replaced it.

Not till then did Puck begin to tumble.

Tug had put that bark there in the first place! He'd been meeting Docie secretly, no telling how long. And if he was such an idiot about her track what must he be about her? Puck's freckles fairly leaped. She'd been pretty dumb not to notice that before. Now, looking back upon the Kettle Creek barbecue last spring, she could see plain as day. . . .

DOCIE MITCHELL had come to the barbecue alone, a shy kitten of a girl wearing a cheap silk "boughten" dress and small scuffed slippers that had been white once. Her eyes looked timidly at the buxom ranch wives and red-cheeked ranch girls and dropped in confusion before the frank admiring gaze of lithe brown range riders.

"Lonesome, she is, pore mite," Maw Haggerty declared, "a-wantin' to make friends even if her menfolks is mighty pe-culiar and stiff-necked." And Maw took the stranger under her motherly wing and introduced her around.

Tug had never made up to girls much, but now Puck remembered that he'd been mighty attentive to the soft-eyed visitor. Puck had kept track of Docie because Docie had a basket with a chocolate cake and that was the swellest looking cake at the picnic. If Puck had thought about Tug at all she'd figured his interested centered on that cake too. Now she knew different. All day Docie had laughed and chatted her way right into the hearts of Kettle Creek folks. Coke Blevins and Old Man Mitchell on their way from Red Dirt with a canvas-covered load of provisions looked surprised to see her there and she looked suddenly frightened.

"Ready to come home now, Docie?" Coke's slanty black eyes held a piggish gleam. Puck wondered howcome he wasn't in the army. He looked strong and healthy enough.

"Better git in, girl," Old Man Mitchell fidgeted.

Docie did. Tug leaned his elbow on the truck door. "I'll be stoppin' by," he said. "Been aimin' to."

"Yes, do," said Docie faintly.

But Coke grated, "We're turrible busy. Docie ain't got time fer company."

Now, on the mountain, Puck got her second wind. She had to admit she'd thought Docie was just swell at the barbecue. But birds of a feather flocked together and that Blue Jay outfit was a strange, mean bunch. Though no one could actually prove anything against them, Puck, remembering the whistle of that bullet past her head, bet they were crooks and Docie was a good-for-nothing little fraud. Tug as gullible as a two-year-old, was still calf-eyed. Time he got over that.

"I reckon she shot at you when yor went to see her," guessed Puck.

"Nope." Tug's jaw muscles showed white. "I'd 'a' knowed how to take shootin' She—she laughed at me."

"What for?"

"For askin' her to marry me."

"Oh Lord," groaned Puck. "You sure jumped in with both feet."

Tug twisted the tip off a spruce branch. "I had it comin'. I'd oughta waited longer, but I had a kind o' feelin' the girl was in trouble and I could help her. She made it plain she loved Coke Blevins."

"Was Coke there?"

"Turned out he was in the next room listenin'. He give me the horse laugh too."

"If she loves him, what was she doin' up here?"

"Come one evenin' to apologize for hurtin' my feelin's. And out of kindness brought a pie. I throwed away the pie."

Poor Tug! It was all or nothing with him. Why couldn't he have been attracted by some sensible ranch girl instead of that two-faced Docie Mitchell? He still loved her—even her silly little footprint in the mud—and Puck knew him well enough to be sure he'd never look at another woman.

Here was trouble worse and worse. Tug might be able to worry along on an empty stomach for a while, but with a busted heart to boot he wouldn't be any account whatever. If he fell down on his job and fire got in the forest and the United States couldn't build enough ships—whew! Puck didn't know what to do.

If the girl had been anyone but Docie Mitchell, she'd have gone straight and told her what a fool she was for turning Tug

down. But she didn't want Docie to marry Tug! Near to tears, she looked at Tug and he was so hollow-cheeked and woebegone that she braced herself. Somebody had to do something! She swallowed hard. It might be—it just might be—Docie wasn't so bad as the rest of the Blue Jay ranch. For Tug's sake, and as a patriotic duty she'd investigate.

"I got to be goin'," she said abruptly. "Gee, I got to—" She fled down the ridge, flung herself on Prunes, and cut for the trail. Every jolt made her cracked rib hurt, but she had to hurry before she lost her nerve.

Joker evidently thought they were going back to Mike's for more huckleberries, for he lit out with a glint in his eye. Puck had to lariat him and tie him to a tree. He bucked and fought so that the frayed rope broke once and she had to waste time tying him again. "Don't you know Mike'd skin you?" she panted. "And I can't have you taggin' me to the Blue Jay. I got to sneak in somehow so they won't shoot at me."

She tied Prunes also, then hurrying on afoot, circled the Blue Jay fence well out of sight and crawled under at a brushy point to the south. Nerves a-prickle, she crept through the bushes, pausing every few moments to listen. Her plan was to follow the ridge till she could see the house and there to wait until she saw Coke and the old man go out to work the tunnel, as she was sure they must. Then she could slip down and talk to Docie alone.

Though everything looked peaceful enough, Puck was as jittery as Prunes when he smelled a bear. She couldn't smell anything nor see anything either, except yonder the narrow road leading down through the pines and the trail that had been cut where the telephone line ran. Kettle Creek housewives never could understand the use of that telephone, for Docie didn't visit over the wires and Coke Blevins called Red Dirt only now and then to order stuff.

A vulture hanging high in the blue let out a scream that set Puck's hair on end. Shucks! Nothing could happen to her here in broad daylight except that the sun was blistering her and she was getting wild oats down her neck and in her shoes. She was empty, that was all, and her rib hurt. This was her job and she'd do it—same as a soldier—for Tug's sake and the gov'ment's.

Now she was near enough to glimpse the house in the gully. It was a tumble-down place, but white curtains were at the windows and a wisp of smoke threaded from the chimney. Docie Mitchell would be the kind to have white curtains! Unbidden to Puck's mind flashed an imaginary picture of Docie in the log cabin Tug was building. Docie, soft-eyed and happy, a born home-maker, setting a bunch of wild flowers on the table, feeding Tug scrumptious chocolate cake. . . .

Puck shook the picture from her head. That wasn't the real Docie. The real Docie was sweet on the surface and rotten underneath. She must be if she was Coke Blevins' girl. But Puck had to prove it, and she wished with all her soul the business was over. A long time she lay watching the house. When nobody appeared she inched forward, trying not to crackle the dry resin leaves.

THAT darn vulture circling and screaming— Must be some carrion down there that he wanted and that was too big for him. The shrill bark of a woodchuck from an old rock dump made Puck jump a foot. In her nervousness she moved forward too fast and suddenly had to throw herself backward and grab at the bushes to keep from falling down a sheer ten-foot break in the hill. There right under her was the tunnel entrance! And backed up to it the old green truck! Above the thudding of her heart she heard Docie's voice, squeezed, unnatural, "You—you murdered him!"

And she heard Coke's answer, raspy as a file, "He asked for it, didn't he? Got skeered and tried to git away in the truck when our partner at Red Dirt phoned the code signal the sheriff was comin'. That don't go, see? We stick together."

Puck's eyes bulged with horror. Sprawled face down beside the truck was Old Man Mitchell—dead!

Coke went on harshly, "We got enough ore here to keep us on easy street the rest of our lives. All we have to do is load it

and drive away. The sheriff can't git here afore an hour. I got it all planned how we can ditch the stuff for a while and fade—"

"I'm not going!"

"Oh yes you are. Pitch in and help load, girl—unless you want some of the same your old man got."

"Keep away from me!"

Puck, flattened on her stomach in the weeds just above the tunnel opening, was petrified with fear. By stretching her neck she could see Docie struggling to free herself from Coke's grasp. Her face was paper white and her eyes enormous black pools.

"I'm not going. I haven't done anything."

"You're one of us. If you didn't know nothin' it's because you was too dumb or too trustin'. Mebbe I better explain," he sneered. "Friends o' mine at the Gold Horn highgraded the stuff and we picked it up at Red Dirt and brought it here. When we'd collected enough, we hauled it out and sold it and nobody knowed but what we'd mined it in this tunnel. Perfect setup. What I can't figure is how the law got onto us." He twisted her arm. "You blabbed to anyone?"

She shook her head.

"You sneaked off one night to see that damn forest ranger. If you told him I'll—" His hand rested on his gun.

"No Coke! No!"

"Sweet on him, huh? Well, I'll fix him when I get time."

"I'll help you load," panted the girl. "I'll go away with you—only don't kill him, Coke!"

Puck had never hated anyone as she hated Coke Blevins right then. If she only had a gun! Docie wasn't a fraud. She was just a slim, frightened girl who hadn't known what her scheming menfolks were up to. And in spite of what she'd said, she loved Tug enough to go away with Coke to save Tug's life. Puck knew this now when it was too late. There wasn't time to go for help. The only weapon she had was a pocket knife. She had to try to save Docie. Maybe if she hurled the open knife with all her might. . . .

She had no chance to try for at that unlucky moment something crashed through the brush behind her. Something big and brown and bright-eyed. Joker! He'd busted the lariat again and trailed her. Though she grabbed to catch him, he swerved by her and in a graceful leap cleared the tunnel opening and landed smack in front of Coke.

Coke hauled at his gun, but held fire as he recognized the elk. "That snoopin' kid!" he snarled. "Where is she?"

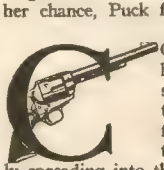
Puck believed her time had come. Too late she made a desperate break to get away. Coke caught her, dragged her fighting and kicking to the tunnel.

"You let that child go!" cried Docie, and struck at him with an old timber.

He dodged. His lips curled in a cruel leer. "I'll let her go, all right—to join Old Man Mitchell. But first she can help load."

"Faster!" harshed Coke, and when Docie faltered, he snarled, "I've changed my mind about wantin' you. You'd only be a nuisance."

That meant he was going to kill Docie too. He'd never leave her and Puck to tell. Of a sudden Puck knew what to do. In her pocket were matches, which she always carried in case she got caught out. If she could throw a lighted match or two into the tinder-dry grass and make a smoke, Tug would see and come busting. Watching her chance, Puck flung one match—two.



COKE, in a hurry, was heaving sacks himself, so at first didn't note the yellow tongues of flame darting through the dry grass and rapidly spreading into the brush. Puck stalled for time in every way she could. She dropped sacks, fumbled them, stumbled all over herself, and Docie, catching on, did likewise. Maybe Tug was coming now.

Joker, who had been investigating the tunnel, came snorting out at the smell of smoke. He reared back from the flames that all at once encircled the entrance, then gave a frightened plunge through them, leaving behind the odor of singed hair.

At the same moment Coke discovered the fire and ripped out an oath. The flames in the dry grass had spread to the nearest group of trees, popping and crackling in growing fury. The fierce heat made the three at the tunnel entrance shrink away.

Lucky, thought Puck, that this hole in the ground was here to shelter them. Then out of the tunnel billowed stifling smoke. The fire must have caught from the hill through some cave-in or old shaft and was burning the rotted mine timbers. A back draft carried deadly fumes straight to the huddled three.

Trapped! Tug hadn't come. Maybe from lack of nourishment, he'd gone to sleep at his station. Puck's plan, her fire would be the death of her and Docie, but Coke was escaping. He was springing for the truck.

"No need to shoot you now," he hissed over his shoulder. "That fire'll git you."

Just then came a shout. Tug! Tug charging down the trail, yelling Docie's name. Puck tried to yell back but her throat emitted only a croak. He plunged toward the house. In the noise of crackling branches and the confusion of smoke he couldn't hear Docie's anguished scream and he didn't see the green truck till it was almost opposite him.

Crack went Coke's gun. Tug crumpled to the ground, and the snaky tongues of flame flicked toward him.

Docie would have dashed through the fire to him if Puck hadn't dragged her back, beat out the sparks in her flimsy dress, and thrown her to the earth. Puck, choking and gasping, woozy in the head, had just sense enough left to throw herself face down against the naked rock.

PUCK couldn't clear away the black fog that pressed down upon her. . . .

"She's comin' around," said a voice that sounded like Tug's. But Tug had been killed!

"Puck, blessed little Puck!" That sounded like Docie, crying, only Docie and she were dead!

Puck's eyes fluttered open. Heaven certainly resembled Towner's sawmill. There was even Mike—and Joker! She sat up. Joker was too big a sinner to go to heaven.

"Take it easy, kid." Tug put his arm around her and Docie did too. Their faces were smoke-blackened and their eyebrows gone, but gee, they looked swell!

"I th-thought we were all d-dead," Puck sobbed.

"Pshaw, a slug in one leg ain't goin' to cramp my style long," scoffed Tug. "Mike and the sawmill gang saved us."

"But how did Mike—"

"I'll tell you how." Mike appeared, wiping his red face and swearing to relieve his feelings. "You can thank that ding-danged blinkety-blanked elk. He come to the mill for more huckleberries and I seen a big singed spot on his hide. You wasn't with him. Then I looked off yonder and seen smoke. Yessir, that's one smart elk. Here Joker, come Joker! I got a nice dish of pree-serves for you."

"Coke?" shuddered Puck.

"His gas tank caught fire and exploded afore he'd gone two hundred yards," said Tug. "Blowed him to perdition."

Docie was trembling. Tug abandoned Puck and tried to put his arm around the girl's shaking shoulders. She pushed him away, her face stark.

"You won't want to touch me when I tell you. I knew they were up to something—Coke and my stepfather—but I shut my eyes to it. I didn't have nerve enough to go to the sheriff. Coke would have killed me. And Dad promised this would be the last time he'd ever have anything to do with one of Coke's deals. I didn't know how bad it was."

"Don't, honey," begged Tug.

"Let me finish. I told you I loved Coke. It wasn't true. I've hated him ever since he dodged the draft. I knew his stripe."

"Forget all that," Tug pleaded. "I love you so much, I swear life'll be right for you from now on!"

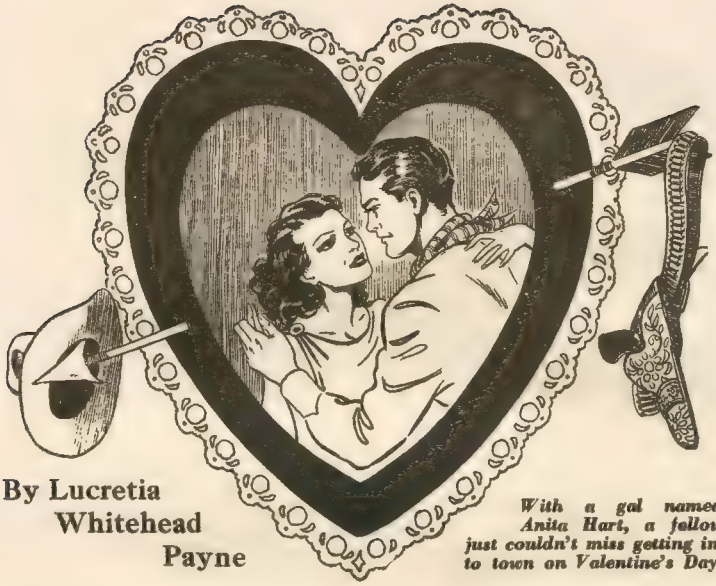
"You can't love me after all the nasty things I said to you that time you came calling," she panted. "Coke made me say them to get rid of you."

"Want you! Lord!" Roughly he gathered her close. "I better be askin' you, do you want a Army reject, a good-fer-nothin' feller—"

She put her hand over his mouth. "A soldier every inch," she told him, "only fighting here in the forests instead of out yonder. Yes, I want him! Oh, I do!"

"Darlin'!" Gently he bent and kissed her.

Kissing, decided Puck, was one thing didn't seem to need any practice. Looked like Tug would never have to eat any more rock soup. It'd be duck soup from now on!



By Lucretia Whitehead Payne

With a gal named Anita Hart, a fellow just couldn't miss getting into town on Valentine's Day.

Valentine Vengeance

TERRY WELCH dropped the receiver into place with a deliberation which contrasted oddly with the seethe of emotion within him. He turned to Uncle Byron Moore who stood by the stove warming himself after his ride through the winter morning, and shook his head.

"It didn't come through with this last shipment neither?" asked the older man, his shoulders sagging with dismay. "Then we're sunk, you and me both, Terry. The cattle'll starve."

Terry's young, wind-bitten face was set and grim, and determination gave an edge to his deep voice. "Beales says there's not one crumb consigned to you and me. In a few days we'll be opening our last stacks of hay, Uncle Byron, and spring's still a long way off. I'm starting to Black Rock pronto to find out the why of this funny business. And I'll find it out, too!" he snapped.

Uncle Byron rubbed a gnarled hand across his bearded cheeks. "You got records of our orders all right, Terry? Receipts, too? Don't forget to take 'em along."

The wiry, hard-muscled young rancher was moving purposefully about the smoke-darkened kitchen of the sprawling log house, while he wrapped up bacon and biscuits, added raisins and cheese, and then tied them all in a small sack.

"This kind of weather it ain't safe to start out without some grub," he explained briefly.

"Sure ain't," agreed the other. "Human critters can't break into a haystack or a barn and get fodder, like them danged elk that busted into our upper fields." He spat

this last out viciously, adding, "And you can't even take a shot at 'em, 'thout breakin' the law."

Terry had stuffed shells into the belt he buckled around him, hung his gun in the holster lying against his lean hips, and now was pulling on sheepskin coat, heavy boots, and fur cap.

"I hate you takin' the long trip into the valley, young feller," said Uncle Byron. "But don't you worry none 'bout things here on High Mesa. Bob and me can take care of everything till you get back. . . . Which hoss you ridin'?"

"I'm skiing. Down the west ridge of Black Canyon. With crust like there is on the snow now, I'll shoot down like a falling star. I'll hit the valley only a few miles from Jake Connor's ranch, and Jake'll let me have a horse to ride on to town."

Uncle Byron's "Good luck, Terry!" was blown back into his mouth as Terry slammed out of the door and faced the zero wind. It seemed to freeze his own breath in his lungs as he hit rapidly toward the gap where Black Canyon yawned downward from the edge of the high benchland where his Triangle T and his neighbor's Slash M lay under three feet of snow.

Winter always came early to High Mesa, and this past fall the snows had rushed in early, covering grazing land and forcing extra feeding. Yet Terry and Uncle Byron might have pulled through had not a band of elk, driven from their range by winter's severity, visited High Mesa's hay fields with disastrous results.

"We've got to get cottonseed cake," Terry had said after surveying the damage. "I'll write the firm in Cheyenne that furnishes the cake and order us a ton apiece. That ought to get us through O.K."

The shipment had come to the town in the valley, but Roy Beales, who was handling the business for Black Rock, had sent word there was none for Triangle T or Slash M. Terry had ordered a second time, and his conversation this morning with Beales had had the same import—no cake for High Mesa. It was not a bit funny. It was so damned serious that Terry was going to find out the why of it!

He poised for an instant at the summit of the silvery slope where the trail tipped to follow the west ridge of Black Canyon. Ahead stretched a world of white, broken only by the dark green of pines and outcroppings of the black rock which characterized the country. Balancing himself to the angle of the decline, Terry was an instant later skimming down the slope; at times coasting swiftly in a veil of swirling white spray; at others, riding high on drifts congealed to almost solid ice from alternate thawing and freezing.

Now he had started he could hardly get to town fast enough. How surprised Anita would be to see him! He'd be there for the Valentine Day dance. For years he and Anita had taken this festival in together. But this year Terry had given up hope of being able to do it.

At thought of Anita, the loveliest as well as the smartest girl in the world, a warm happiness swept over Terry. Although they were not exactly engaged, there was an "understanding." Anita knew that the only reason Terry hadn't asked her outright to marry him was because he wanted to feel he was firmly established as one of the countryside's successful cattle raisers before he asked the richest girl in Black Rock to be his wife.

Anita Hart had inherited from her father the big Hart Mercantile Company, and ran it with unbelievable efficiency, and at a profit equal to old Tom Hart's. For as long as he could remember, whenever he had come to town with his parents Terry had played about the big store. He always thought the brightest spot and the most entrancing sound in the cavernous depths or in the shadows of great piles of merchandise the one where he could see Anita's red-gold curls and hear her gay, infectious laughter.

So they had grown up, seeing each other often, until in one certain blinding moment Terry had discovered that Anita had become the dearest thing in life. His joy when he found out that she returned his love overwhelmed him, and until this past fall there had been no shadow between them.

Their quarrel, which Terry was sure would be forgotten when they saw each other again, had occurred over Anita's insistence that he accept money from her to

make a down payment on the Armisted place, a splendid ranch almost bordering the outskirts of the town, which he planned to buy for his and Anita's home. In that way, Anita could keep in close touch with the store, which was impossible if she went to live on High Mesa.

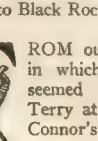
"I can't accept your offer, sweetheart," he had said, fighting a weakening of his resolve when he thought of being so near his beloved. "For several reasons. One's because Uncle Byron's getting pretty old, and since his boys are both in the service, he needs me to help him if things get too tough. Another's because I won't take money from anyone—even you, sweetheart—if I can't earn it myself. By next spring, if I can bring my cattle through as I hope, I'll be able to make a good down payment on the place, and see my way clear to go ahead on a big scale. But this winter I must feed the hay on High Mesa to my stock and keep an eye on Uncle Byron and the Slash M as well."

Anita's eyes had been stormy, and her graceful, golden head imperious as she faced him. "Does Uncle Byron mean more to you than I do, Terry?" she'd demanded. "If you stay on High Mesa all winter, where do I come in? We'll miss all the good times I've planned."

Terry had looked longingly at the persuasive lips so near his own, for she would not let him look into her eyes curtained behind gold-tipped lashes. "Uncle Byron's not really kin, but he's done more for me than most kinfolk, helping me get Triangle T to a place where it's making more money than Dad could ever do. And we can telephone, and write, Anita *mía*, and when spring comes and I sell the cattle, we'll be able to go out on the Armisted place together. Just keep thinking of that, the way I'll be doing, and the time won't seem so long."

Anita had refused to understand. When she had such a generous income she couldn't see why the man she expected to marry should refuse to accept a loan from her. Especially when it was on the home she was to share with him. And because Terry was proud and independent, and she was hurt and vexed, they had quarreled bitterly. The next morning when he had ridden out of town, she hadn't come to tell him goodby, and although he made excuses to linger around for an hour, he did not see her, and rode away discouraged and sore at heart.

There had been a few brief, impersonal letters from Anita in reply to his affectionate, loving missives. There had been a few unsatisfactory telephone calls, but most of the time winter's storms had put the line out of commission. This morning was the first time Terry had been able to get through to Black Rock for weeks.



FROM out of a winter world in which he had for hours seemed the only inhabitant, Terry at length reached Jake Connor's ranch.

"Hi, Jake!" he called, unfastening his skis and shaking fine snow from his clothing. "You got a caller!"

The gaunt, bent rancher shambled to the door, and at sight of his caller squinted in amazement. "I've heerd tell," he vouchsafed, "that the high country's liable in wintertime to send folks as live there loco. . . . Looks like you're one of 'em, Terry Welch, skiin' 'round the country like you was on a picnic."

Terry's cold face cracked in a grin. "Sure, Jake, I'm a gentleman of leisure. On my way to town to take in the Valentine dance tomorrow, if you'll loan me a horse to get there." Then sobering, as anxiety again pressed on him, "You still got plenty feed, Jake, or you had to get cake?"

"I'm runnin' a mite low on hay, dang this confounded long, hard winter! If this blasted snow don't go off soon, I'll have to get cake all right. I've writ Roy Beales, and he's said he can let me have some, was I to need it."

"So-o?" exclaimed Terry in surprise. "Does that mean Beales is buying more cake than just what's been ordered? Keeps plenty on hand?" And he thought, "He didn't mention anything like that to me, and he knows that my cattle and Uncle Byron's are in a serious fix."

The two were walking toward the stables as Connor answered, "Handling it through the Hart Mercantile, I reckon. Beales acts nowadays like he owns the concern. Probably thinks he's got Anita Hart lassoed,

you bein' outa the picter now. Though how a girl like Anita, who we all thunk was goin' to hitch up with you, Terry, can take up with that snooty cuss, I don't savvy."

Roy Beales and Anita! The idea had never occurred to Terry, and the force of Connor's surmise struck him a sickening jolt. Beales had come to Black Rock in reply to an advertisement by the Hart Company for a trained storeman, and he had proved he was all that. Yet he had never been popular with the people who traded with the store, and to Terry in particular his sleek fox-like smoothness, shifty eyes and rat-trap mouth had always been obnoxious.

Though he could hardly wait to reach town and see the girl he loved, he looked carefully over the stabled horses with experienced eyes before he said, "Can I take the buckskin, Jake? Looks like he's strong and speedy." Then he went on, gratefully, "Some day I'll get even with you for this, and don't you forget it. You're a real friend."

But Terry's eyes were hard and his tanned features bleak and grim as he rode toward town at a fast trot. Was he too late? Had Anita's love for him cooled as a result of their quarrel and his long absence? He couldn't bring himself to believe it, yet uneasy and unhappy thoughts traveled close to him all the long, cold ride.

It was late afternoon when he stabled the buckskin at the town's big livery barn, engaged a room at the warm, steamy hotel, and then strode along the snow-packed street to Black Rock's most pretentious building, which housed the Hart Mercantile Company's big general store.

As Terry pulled open the frosty, glass-paneled doors, he smelled the never-forgotten mingled odors of drygoods and coffee and dried fruit and leather that drifted through the establishment. For a moment he stood uncertainly inside the door, his hungry gaze searching for a golden head that always caught and held the light, just as it caught and held his heart! Searching also for the lovely, animated face with gold-lashed blue eyes and long, laughing lips.

At last his quest was rewarded, and he reached Anita's side just as her customer departed.

"Anita! Anita *mia!*" He spoke her name as if it were a melody singing through him. His heart was singing as she flashed a delighted glance at him, her lips curved in delight, her slender hands reaching out to him in happy welcome. How had he ever had the strength of will to stay away from her so long, Terry wondered as his arms slipped about her and he felt the wonder of her yielding to his embrace.

"Terry!" she breathed. "Terry, I've so missed you."

"I came for the Valentine dance after all, you see, sweetheart. *Our* dance. I want a Hart for my Valentine this year as always."

So sure had he been of her welcome agreement that he felt a chill worse than that of his long, hard trip when the light died from her eyes, and she pulled herself free of his arms. He was not conscious of anyone near, only of sickening disappointment as she said:

"I'm afraid that's quite impossible, Terry."

"You mean," he began, and stopped, aware of someone standing behind him listening.

A smooth patronizing voice broke in: "In town on business, Welch? Something we can do for you here in the store?"

Roy Beales smiled at the rancher. But it was a smile devoid of warmth or friendliness. More like the expression of a fox which had snatched its prey from a weaker animal. How like a fox he was, thought Terry, swinging around and looking down on the storeman, whom he overtopped by four good inches.

His own voice was cold and expressionless. "In town to find out why there's no cottonseed cake for the two ranches on High Mesa. And I aim to find out about it before I leave!"

Beales hunched his shoulders insolently, and Terry felt his hands clench at his sides as Anita slipped away and disappeared. Beales said, "I told you over the phone all there is to know. Bad business, I realize, but you can probably buy hay to get you through."

"You know damned well I can't buy hay!" snapped Terry. "When practically every cowman's had to buy cake it means they've no hay!"

"That doesn't necessarily mean they're short," said the other with smug superiority. "Some think it's good to use cake along with regular feed. Maybe I can locate some hay for you."

"And if you can," said Terry contemptuously, "you know that the Triangle T and the Slash M couldn't get the cattle to it! What kind of a line are you handing me, Beales? You seem to forget I'm a cowman, not a storekeeper!"

Leaving Beales unceremoniously, Terry hurried after Anita, who was putting away things for the night. "You can't mean what you said, sweetheart," he began reproachfully. "Why, I came to town mostly to take you to the dance."

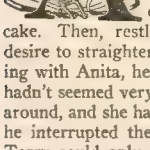
Her voice was quite expressionless, and she did not look at him. "I've promised to go with Roy."

"Don't I come first?" he queried, hurt and unhappy. "I'd thought that you and I—"

"Are just old friends, Terry. So please don't make it harder for me by not understanding what I've told you." Terry was sure he heard a catch in her voice, and had taken an impulsive step toward her when Roy Beales reached them.

"Oh, here you are, Anita," he said, proprietarily. "We've just time to talk over that grocery order. . . . G'night, Welch."

Edged thus unceremoniously out of the picture, Terry said a brusque good-by and let himself out into the cold night, mingled anger and disappointment fighting in him. There was, however, another piece of business to investigate, and he hoped grimly to be more successful in this matter.



AFTER supper at the hotel, he went to the telegraph office and sent a wire to the Cheyenne firm from which he had ordered the cottonseed cake. Then, restless and consumed with desire to straighten out the misunderstanding with Anita, he went to her house. She hadn't seemed very happy when Beales was around, and she had certainly changed after he interrupted their first conversation. If Terry could only see her alone!

A short walk brought him to her house, and he stopped outside the picket fence, his eager eyes traveling to the brightly lighted living room. He saw Anita's golden curls bent over some sewing, and his heart beat high for a moment until he also saw Beales stretched lazily in a big chair smoking. Altogether a very domestic scene!

Terry thought he had had enough blows in the short time since he had reached Black Rock. This last one sent him almost reeling back to the hotel, where, after an unhappy pipe or two and some pessimistic conversation with other ranchers regarding the hard winter and shortage of feed, he went somberly to bed, but not to sleep.

Early next morning he visited Black Rock's real estate operator, jovial Ed Gates. Ed greeted him with a friendly slap on the shoulders which well nigh upset Terry's stalwart frame, yet was heartwarming in contrast to last night's reception at the Hart store.

"Welcome to our city," he boomed. "What can we do for you?"

"I want to make a down payment on the Armisted place, Ed, and here's a check for the amount." No use to explain that this check represented practically Terry's entire bank balance. He wanted to cinch the deal while he was here.

Gates shook his head, regretfully. "You're too late by about a month, Terry."

"Too late! But I'd talked it over with you last fall! You understood that I intended—"

"But remember, no money had passed. If you hadn't been away off there on High Mesa and the telephone out of order, I'd have got in touch with you. But with you snowed in in that damned high country it was hopeless. And this buyer had the cash."

"And the buyer?" The question a whiplash of despair.

"Anita Hart. Though it's funny she'd want a ranch, her always busy at the store. Probably aims to lease it. I s'pose you've heard about her and Roy Beales? She used to be your girl, didn't she, Terry? Too bad, for I can't stomach Beales."

"The transaction's completed?" Terry asked this mechanically, with a faint hope that Anita might have changed her mind.

"I'm expectin' the last papers from the

county seat any day. Sorry. Why don't you see about leasing from Anita?"

"Perhaps I might," said the other and automatically found himself walking toward the Hart store. He'd face Anita and get an explanation for this despicable action. Wasn't it enough for her to throw him over for Beales without knocking out his purchase of the Armisted place?

On the way he stopped at the telegraph office and found an answer from Cheyenne to the effect that both of his orders had been filled and shipped to Black Rock. The firm was at a loss to understand why he had not received the cake, and would like to have him investigate and report to them.

"And that," said Terry between tight lips, "is something more for Roy Beales to try to explain!"

Terry soon found Anita, but could not get a word with her in private. She greeted him casually and quickly, and then absorbed herself with customers, whom she made no attempt to escape. Finally, ablaze with anger over this snub, Terry got hold of Beales and showed him the telegram.

"Now let's hear how good you are at explanations!" he snapped.

He had come upon Beales in a corner between a wall and a counter, and at the other's trapped expression experienced inward satisfaction. Despite the telegram, Beales stuck to it that no cake had come for Triangle T or Slash M, and although Terry wanted to choke the truth out of him —for he was sure he was lying—he couldn't make a scene here.

"I'll see you about this again," he said grimly, and went to see the owner of Black Rock's other general store who, until this year, had handled the cottonseed cake shipments. From grizzled Martin Cox Terry learned that Beales had offered the Cheyenne people a substantial sum for the business.

"What could I do?" asked Cox somberly. "I couldn't afford to outbid him. Besides, I didn't know about it until the deal'd gone through. Most of the ranchers don't like Beales, thinkin' he ain't to be trusted. But so long as he's in with Anita, that everybody thinks the world of, they play along with him."

Terry thanked the storekeeper and departed, more sure than ever that the odor of something skunkish was growing stronger.

Somehow the day wore on until evening and time for the big dance, when Terry joined the merrymakers. There he towered, tall and handsome, above most of the men, and he received a welcoming smile from every girl present. He was dancing with Paula Robbins when Anita and Beales arrived, and Terry caught for a fleeting moment hurt amazement on the girl's pensive face. An instant later she and her escort joined the dance, with Beales taking evident care to keep away from Terry.

Nor did Terry make any effort to cut in on Anita, until, during an hilarious Paul Jones, he met her in the circle and deliberately drew her away, out of the room. He felt a shiver shake her slender, graceful body, and it sounded as if she was fighting tears. Then in the quiet of the deserted hall he bent his head until he could look into her face, and saw two great tears rolling down it. Holding her closer, he begged passionately.

"Can't you tell me what's troubling you, my darling? Won't you tell me you'll marry me, Anita *mia*, and let me make you happy?"

"Oh, Terry, if only I could! Please trust me, no matter what I do, but let me go now. It's of you I'm thinking."

"No!" he began, and saw Beales coming through the door, a veritable thundercloud, in his sly eyes and fox-like face ill-concealed triumphant satisfaction.

"I suppose you were telling Welch goodby, Anita," he said curtly. "But now come back and dance." And, over his shoulder, "I'll say the same, Welch. Sorry I couldn't run down any feed for you."

"Perhaps I'll have better luck myself," retorted Terry. "As soon as I attend to one more piece of business."

ATTENDING to this "piece of business" took him now to the Hart Mercantile building, where a key which Anita had given him long ago when he used to do things for her after store hours, let him into the empty, echo-

ing building. Going straight through to the rear, where the warehouse was located, he turned on a powerful flashlight and began clambering over piled-up boxes and bales of merchandise.

He looked closely in the dark, distant corners, and three times disappointment had laid hold of him, until in the last corner he found a huge tarpaulin. Throwing back an end of this, he found under it a pile of sacks like those used to ship cottonseed cake, and after making small slits in several of the sacks, he saw they contained just that.

Pulling a tapeline from his pocket, Terry measured the approximate dimensions of this pile, and computed the contents. The result was close enough to the amount of cake which should have been delivered to him and Uncle Byron to prove to him that Beales had kept it hidden here, probably intending to sell it later to other ranchers.

Beales wanted to ruin Terry Welch! This was now very evident. If Terry could not get his cattle through the winter, he would have nothing to offer Anita, and he had been counting on this year's sales to put him among the well-to-do ranchers of the country. Beales wanted Anita for himself, and since he was unscrupulous and underhanded, it wasn't strange he'd try to ruin his rival. But what about Anita? She seemed to have sided against Terry, too, else why had she bought the Armisted place when she knew he planned to purchase it?

It was all a disheartening puzzle he was trying to solve, and he went now to the office, where he should be able to find the bills of lading for the cake. On them would be listed the stockmen who had purchased it, the amount each had ordered, and the price.

He felt like a housebreaker as he rummaged through the office desk and files. But success rewarded him sooner than he had hoped, and he had just stuffed the important papers into his pocket when a sound at the door brought him pivoting in that direction.

Roy Beales stood there gloating maliciously. "This is better than I thought. To catch Terry Welch, red-handed, ransacking the office of the Hart Mercantile Company! This spells your finish, my friend, when Anita hears about it! Now hand over what you've just put into your pocket!"

Terry made no move to comply. "You haven't all the cards by a long way, Beales," he retorted. "When Anita hears what I have to tell, and can now prove, you're the one who'll be thrown out on your ear! Now get out of my way!"

A big automatic had appeared in Beales' fist, and the flame of hate burning in the fellow's narrow, sallow face warned Terry that he was in real danger. Snapping off his flashlight, he hurled it straight at his enemy's head, and as the fellow pivoted and dodged, it gave Terry a split-second chance. With a swift lunge Terry succeeded in knocking the automatic out of Beales' hand, and his steel-hard arms closed about the fellow's chest, pulling him backward.

Squirming in Terry's grasp like a snake, Beales twisted around until he had his head directly under his captor's chin. Then, like a spring released, he straightened. The top of his head connected with Terry's chin, whose head snapped back and arms went slack.

Wrenching free, Beales evidently believed he had Terry at his mercy. "I'll tell everybody that I caught Terry Welch robbing Anita Hart and had to kill him in self-defense. And now I'll have a clear field with the girl, even if she was holding me off all winter."

Groggy though he was, Terry was still able to move, and had already put a long table between himself and Beales. At the boast about Anita, the murk and haze which enveloped him suddenly cleared. Still pretending dizziness, he stopped at one corner of the table, his head lolling forward on his chest.

Following up what he believed to be his advantage, Beales covered the few feet between them, hands clenched, ready for a knockout blow when he reached the ranchman. But as he reached the spot, Terry's whip-lash body jerked erect, his long young arms reached out and vised his enemy with an inescapable grip.

At that instant the room was bright with electric light, and Terry saw Anita Hart in the doorway, expertly holding a small pis-

tol. Instantly Beales broke into violent accusations of Terry Welch.

Ignoring the tirade, Anita spoke to Terry. "Here's rope to tie him with until we can straighten out this affair. Here's a telegram to you I found out in the warehouse. After what it says I suppose you've been trying to find out what happened to the cake you ordered. I found where it was stored, too, and believe me, Terry, I'd had no idea till then that Roy Beales had been up to such crooked business."

"Thanks for coming when you did, Anita. This is all that's necessary to show this snake he'll be better off if he takes the first train out of town.

Terry yanked Beales along by the coat collar and gave him a swift shove out the front door. "Reckon we won't see him again," he said shortly.

He turned then to show Anita the other proof he'd found of Beales' crookedness. "If I'd believed you knew anything about it, I'd have gone straight to you, sweetheart. But you seemed to have gone over so completely to Beales, I had to do my scouting on my own. Why wouldn't you have anything to do with me since I came to town?"

Anita put both arms around Terry's neck, her beautiful eyes warm with affection. "Roy threatened to ruin you if I wouldn't agree to marry him, and said he had a sure way of doing it. He learned that you'd wanted the Armisted place and said he was going to buy it himself. I had to hurry to get ahead of him. It was the only thing I could do.

"The final papers of the sale won't be ready for a day or two, so I had to play along with him for fear he might find a way to block it. He's utterly ruthless and almost diabolical, the way he can get anything he wants. He really had me scared once or twice, and wanting to keep him from hurting you, I had to pretend I liked him. But it's you I've loved all along, Terry darling!"

"If you'll let me buy the Armisted place from you, Anita *mía,* everything will be just as I dreamed. . . . And now, let's hurry back to our dance, sweetheart. I want to get there in time to dance *Home, Sweet Home* with my Valentine."

Why Man's Prayers Did Not Stop Hitler

Millions of people daily practice meditation, prayer, new thought and other spiritual exercises. For many years people of good will have been praying for the overthrow of Hitler, Hirohito and what they stand for. Why has the answer been so long delayed? Why do so many other prayers remain unanswered? Why does calamity often befall us in spite of our prayers?

Thirty years ago, in Forbidden Tibet, behind the highest mountains in the world, a young Englishman named Edwin J. Dingle found the answers to these questions. A great mystic opened his eyes. A great change came over him. He realized the strange Power that Knowledge gives.

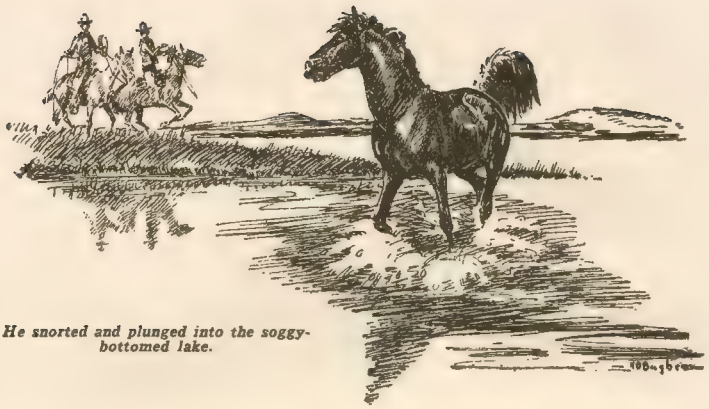
That Power, he says, can transform the life of anyone. Questions, whatever they are, can be answered. The problems of health, death, poverty and wrong can be solved.

In his own case he was brought back to splendid health. He acquired wealth, too, as well as world-wide professional recognition. Thirty years ago he was sick as a man could be and live. Once his coffin was bought. Years of almost continuous tropical fevers, broken bones, near blindness, privation and danger had made a human wreck of him, physically and mentally.

He was about to be sent back to England to die when a strange message came—"They are waiting for you in Tibet." He wants to tell the whole world what he learned there under the guidance of the greatest mystic he ever encountered during his 21 years in the Far East. He wants everyone to experience the greater health and the Power which there came to him.

Within 10 years he was able to retire to this country with a fortune. He had been honored by fellowships in the World's leading geographical societies for his work as a geographer. And today, 30 years later, he is still so athletic, capable of so much work, so young in appearance, it is hard to believe he has lived so long.

As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send to readers of this notice a 9,000-word treatise. It is free. For your free copy, send your name and address to the Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. H-196, Los Angeles 4, Calif. Write promptly.



He snorted and plunged into the soggy-bottomed lake.

Mustangs White and Black

By J. Frank Dobie

These are the sort of legends that can grow up only among a free people, in a land where love of liberty is a passion. No Nazi could understand them.

THE great horse went under many names—the White Steed of the Prairies, the Pacing White Stallion, the White Mustang, the Ghost Horse of the Plains. There were, in fact, various extraordinary white mustang stallions, scattered far apart and living at different times. In tradition they blended into one superb stallion of supreme grace, beauty, speed, fire, endurance and intelligence. The blend was an animal whose passion for liberty was also the passion of the free-riding men who chased him. Both he and they were ready to die, if need be, to maintain that liberty.

John R. Morgan came to Travis County, Texas, from Kentucky in 1868. He was soon riding with his uncle, John W. Young, who had at that time been a range man for going on a quarter of a century. From him and from other men who were then old-timers, Morgan learned the detailed history of the wonderful horse. I will try to give his story as he gave it to me when he was a very old man. It is a story that belongs to days long before barbed wire was dreamed of.

In the early 1840's a remarkable stallion appeared among the wild horses ranging on Onion Creek, in Travis County. He had the markings of a purebred Arabian. His form was perfect. His alertness and vitality were superb. He was pure white. His tail brushed the tall mesquite grass that carpeted the earth, and his tossing mane swept to his knees. His only gait out of a walk was a pace, and it was soon found that he never, no matter how hard pressed, broke that pace. His *mañada*, or bunch of mares, normally numbered from fifty to sixty head —double the size of an ordinary mustang *mañada*.

His favorite watering place was on Onion Creek near McKinney Falls, but he led his *mañada* over a great range, southwest across the Blanco, the San Marcos and to the Guadalupe. It was known that he at

times ranged even as far south as the Nueces, though this was not on his accustomed round. He kept clear of the timbers, never crossed the Colorado to the east, and did not range into the rocky cedar hills to the west. He seemed to like the rich mesquite grass of rolling country edging the blacklands better than that on the blacklands themselves. His habits were closely studied.

It was observed that when persistently chased, the White Stallion usually moved southward. It was generally supposed that he had come up from that direction. There was some evidence that he had been imported to Mexico, had been brought up as far as the Texas Border by one of the owners of the great horseranches occupying that country, and then, after being established on this ranch, had quit it and the semi-domesticated horse stock to run with the mustangs. Many a good ranch stallion in those days answered the call of the wild mustangs, some of them never to be recovered.

The White Stallion, no matter how chased, always in time came back to the water of, and the mesquite grass along Onion Creek. The favorite point of view from which to see him and his *mañada* was Pilot Knob, about four miles from McKinney Falls. From this eminence John W. Young himself saw the stallion and his *mañada* several times. Any mustanging party that proposed a chase generally sent a scout to Pilot Knob to locate their quarry.

The White Stallion's color, his alert movements and the large size of his *mañada*, all made him and the bunch he led conspicuous. If started, he would lead out pacing—single-footing—the *mañada* following at a dead run. In a mile's distance he would gain at least a hundred and fifty yards on anything behind him. Then he would stop and look back, and wait while his bunch approached. If pursuers were still following, he would pace on, gaining and gaining, but again would stop and look back, thus keeping out of shooting, as well as roping, distance.

The Indians had spotted him and they gave him a few chases, but the most persistent chasers were from San Antonio, then a horseback town. A certain doctor of San Antonio who was a horse fancier heard of the White Stallion, saw him in action, and offered five hundred dollars for him if delivered in sound condition. Five hundred dollars in those days amounted to a small fortune.

A Mexican named Santa Ana Cruz determined to win the prize. He had a ranch on Onion Creek, near McKinney Falls, and had numerous *vaqueros* under him. He had led a desperate life, and it is said that he kept as many as ten guards around his house every night. His men had chased the White Stallion numerous times. One day they ran him seventy-five miles south and, when they got back home two days later, found him grazing with his mares on the accustomed range.

Now, to win the five hundred dollars, Santa Ana Cruz picked twelve riders, furnished each of them with two horses selected for speed and endurance—particularly endurance—and disposed them in the direction that the White Stallion might be expected to run after he was started. A scout on Pilot Knob saw the *mañada* go in to water. After the horses had drunk, the nearest of the twelve men began the chase. The White Pacer took out in the direction of San Antonio. That first day, however, he did not keep his direction, and before the morning of the second day he had circled back onto his favorite range. He was crowded harder, his mares lagged more, and on this day he crossed the Guadalupe, going southwest. For three days and three nights the Santa Ana Cruz men ceaselessly pursued him. The time picked for the chase was in the full of the moon in June, and the country covered was, in those days, nearly all open prairie.

Before the end of the third day, every animal in the *mañada* following the White Stallion had been run down. He himself, however, had not once lagged, had not once broken his single-footing, except to change from right to left and left to right. Two of Santa Ana Cruz' relay men trailed him across the Frio River. Then they quit. The White Stallion was still pacing toward the Rio Grande.

He never returned to his old range. In time the Onion Creek country learned why.

Going on south, the Pacing Mustang no

doubt drank at the Nueces River. Before modern ranchmen built tanks, drilled wells and put up windmills, the wide country between the Nueces and the Rio Grande was very sparsely watered. In some places it is a level country, all brushed today; in other places it is crumpled into high, rough hills and cut by deep canyons. About three miles from a water hole in one of these dry canyons there was, in the 40's, a Mexican ranch called Chaparro Prieto. The low rock house, with port holes against Indian attacks, and the adjacent corrals were located in a wide draw matted with mesquite grass. Nearby was a hand-dug well that supplied water for the ranch people and for the saddle horses. All stock loose on the range watered at the big hole in the canyon, the only watering within a radius of many miles.

The hole was boxed in by the canyon walls on both sides and by a high bluff above it, leaving only one entrance—from the north. One hot afternoon a *vaquero* from the Chaparro Prieto, while riding near the water hole saw a lone white horse approaching in a slow pace from the north. At the instant of observation he was hidden by some black chaparral and was considerably to one side of the trail the horse was traveling.

The animal's behavior indicated that he had smelled the water. He was very gaunt, which meant he had not drunk for a long while. He was evidently jaded, but his footing, though weary, seemed secure, and he maintained an alertness in ears, eyes and nostrils. The wind was in the *vaquero's* favor. He cautiously slipped a hand over his mount's nostrils to prevent a possible whinny. As the horse passed nearer, he recognized him from descriptions he had often heard—as the Pacing White Stallion of the mustangs.

Here was a chance to rope what so many riders had tried and failed to capture. As has been said, there was but one entrance and exit to the boxed water hole. The *vaquero* knew that the thirsty stallion would drink deep and come back up the bank loggy with water. After the mustang had gone down the trail out of sight, the *vaquero* placed himself in position for a sure throw when the animal should emerge. The man was riding a fresh pony. He did not have long to wait.

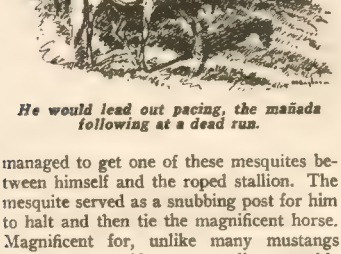
Within a few minutes the long sought-for lover of freedom emerged, his ears working, his body refreshed, his senses more alert. He saw the trap and made a dash so cunning that he eluded the rope's throw. Quickly recoiling his riata for another cast, the *vaquero* spurred in pursuit. The Steed of the Prairies had come two hundred miles or more from his range on Onion Creek, besides pacing in great circles before he had finally headed straight for the Rio Grande. His marvelous endurance was at last wearing out; the water that had refreshed him also loaded him down.

The second loop thrown by the fast-running *vaquero* went over his head. But he did

He wheeled and with wide-open mouth rushed at his captor.

not run full speed on the rope and jerk himself down. His response showed that he had been roped before. He wheeled just as the rope tightened and with wide-open mouth rushed at his captor. He did not seem to see the horse ridden by the *vaquero*. He was after the man. He nearly seized him, but the agile cow-pony had wheeled also.

Fortunately for the *vaquero's* life, some scattered mesquite trees grew just ahead of him. Guiding his well reined pony, he

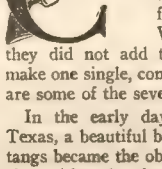


He would lead out pacing, the mañada following at a dead run.

managed to get one of these mesquites between himself and the roped stallion. The mesquite served as a snubbing post for him to halt and then tie the magnificent horse. Magnificent for, unlike many mustangs appearing magnificent at a distance, this one remained so at close quarters, even though worn by his long war of defense.

Tying him up as close as he could and leaving him to lunge at the rawhide-strong riata, the *vaquero* left in a long lope to get help at the Rancho Chaparro Prieto. He returned in less than an hour with two other *vaqueros*. With three ropes on the White Mustang now, thus checking his attempts to fight, they led and drove him to a spot on the prairie near the ranch corrals where the mesquite grass was particularly fine. There they threw the proud King of the Mustangs, tied ropes on him so that he could not choke himself to death, fixed a clog on one of his forefeet, and staked him. When night came, he was standing where they left him, not having taken a mouthful of grass.

The next day they carried a sawed-off barrel, used as a trough, within the horse's reach and filled it with water. He did not notice it. For ten days and ten nights he remained there, grass all about him, water at his nostril's tip, without taking one bite to eat or one swallow out of the trough. Then he lay down and died. He fulfilled the ringing cry of Patrick Henry, "Give me liberty or give me death." As he had lived, he died—nobly.



CERTAIN black mustang stallions achieved fame also, but no one of them ever became so famous as *the* Pacing White Mustang, and they did not add themselves together to make one single, continuous tradition. Here are some of the several:

In the early days of Parker County, Texas, a beautiful black leader of the mustangs became the object of many men's desire. After they had tried in various ways to catch him, two or three persistent mustangers dug a hole large enough to contain a man out on a prairie which the black and his *mañada* frequently used. Grass made the whole invisible except to eyes almost over it. Day after day one of the men rode to this hole, gave his horse to a partner to lead out of sight, and, with loaded rifle, waited for the mustang to approach within shooting distance. His object was to crease the mustang—shoot him through the top of the neck so that the tendon running there would be so injured as to paralyze the animal temporarily. Creasing took an expert shot; a fraction high, and the bullet would be harmless; a fraction too low, and it would be fatal.

After the concealed mustanger's patience was about exhausted, his companions managed one day to haze the black stallion within rifle shot. The bullet paralyzed the beautiful stallion all right—paralyzed him permanently.

Among the thousands of mustang horses grazing in the San Joaquin Valley of California in early days, the one that lives strongest in stories still told was a black stallion. Because he was the most beautiful and the fleetest animal in all the *mañadas* ranging around Tulare Lake, he was the most sought for. Pens were built with long wings to catch him. While many other mus-

tangs were captured in these pens, the black never allowed himself to be hemmed in. His fame spread. Finally two cowboys spied him feeding out on the point of a long tongue of land jutting into the lake. Loosening riatas and yelling, they rode toward him. At last they had the stallion cut off! He snorted and plunged into the soggy-bottom lake. When he got out to where the water was about halfway up his sides, he began floundering in the mud. The men retreated, so as to give him a chance to get back on the land—and come by them on his way out. The black paused, seemed to consider, and then plunged farther out from the peninsula, his struggles growing more desperate. It looked as if he designed drowning rather than capture. And drown he did.

THE action of the captured White Stallion in standing on grass and beside water for ten days without touching either appears to have been as deliberate as the self-starvation of any hunger-striker in India. Though his captors may have injured him internally, the injury could hardly have destroyed his thirst. Certainly they broke his heart. The manner in which the Tulare black chose the fatal mud rather than safe footing on man-dominated land looks like another case of wilful suicide, though terror may have driven him to death—terror at a threat to his wild, free way of living.

In the fall of 1882 W. K. Shipman, who now lives out from the edge of San Antonio, was an eighteen-year-old cowboy ranging on Jim Ned Creek in West Texas. He had already bossed a herd up the trail. The sparsity of men on the frontier and the opportunities for self-reliance made boys develop early. Except for drift fences, the range was still open, and many mustangs yet ran on the vast, broken prairies east of the caprock. Shipman had noted especially one band led by a blood-bay stallion with black mane and tail. He got six other cowboys to go in with him to capture this band, all agreeing that Shipman himself should have the stallion if they ever got him within reach of a rope.

After some preliminary running, the mustangers managed to work a belled mare into the wild band. The stallion adopted her, and her bell proved to be a considerable help to the pursuers at night.

The mustangs were accustomed to watering in Jim Ned Creek, to which they had to descend from prairie country down trails through the roughs. Now they seemed afraid to enter the rough land and thus get cut off from their open running grounds, though by crossing the breaks they might have cut the buckboard off from pursuit.

For three days and nights the cowboys kept so close behind them that they took no chances in going down to water and, of course, ate very little. At the end of this time they were near enough walked down so that they could be thrown in with some manageable range horses and hazed into a big cow pen.

In the pen, the blood-bay stallion, his black mane and tail marking Spanish ancestry, showed up as beautiful, as well proportioned and as desirable as he had appeared while running in the distance on the prairies. During the long chase he had exercised much more than the other animals in his band, sometimes leading them, often driving them, frequently racing up one side of them and down the other. Now he stood gaunt, jaded, but still with plenty of life in him, and apparently as sound as a dollar.

When roped, he struggled but did not fight. When mounted, he did not pitch. Guiding him with a hackamore and accompanied by two other men, Shipman rode out of the pen toward Jim Ned Creek, some distance off, and into water not more than eighteen inches deep. The reins of his hackamore loosened, the mustang thrust his muzzle into the water up to his eyes. Then he lay down, his muzzle still submerged.

His rider quickly loosened the girth and all three men struggled to force the mustang's head out for air. He would not let them. He drowned himself right there. No doubt he was dazed, past the stage of using clear-headed judgment. Certain psychologists say that no man who kills himself is entirely sane at the time. However that may be, taking the mustang stallion's liberty from him took his instinct for life.

Lobo Law

By L. Ernenwein

THE STORY SO FAR:

DEPUTY U. S. MARSHAL STEVE RENNEVANT, on the trail of the Faro Kid, runs onto wanted WHITEY HALLMARK whom he passes up in the hope that Hallmark will lead him to other crooks. Then, to water his horse, Steve rides into the town of San Sureño, where he learns Hallmark is foreman for DIAMOND DAN BANNERMAN, owner of the Double D, the Border Belle Saloon, and ruthless and crooked boss of San Sureño.

Bannerman has about ruined the range's former top rancher, JEFF CRUZATTE of the Anvil, and has even tried, unsuccessfully, to court Jeff's blonde and beautiful daughter, ANNE.

Here in town Steve runs into an old friend, a piano-playing gambler, PETE MODESTO, whom t.b. has driven to dealing from the bottom of the deck for Bannerman. Pete admits to Steve that Bannerman has ruined Cruzatte through crooked cards, but on learning that the rancher has gone into the Border Belle to face down Bannerman, begs Steve to get Cruzatte out of there alive.

Because he owes Pete a debt for once having saved his life, and also perhaps for the sake of blonde Anne Cruzatte, Steve goes to the saloon and blocks Bannerman's play. Cruzatte gets out safely, but then the wolves gang up on Steve. Only because Pete, who is watching from a window, throws his watch at a chandelier and puts out the light, is Steve able to escape.

By now Jeff Cruzatte's son, BOB, has come back, bullet-ridden, from a quest for money to carry on the fight against the Double D. He is put to bed in the Cattle King Hotel run by his fiancée, KATE CARMODY, and is carefully nursed by Kate and Anne.

Steve is now the target for Double D gunhands, particularly the two most dangerous, TURK GALLEGO and RED HAGGIN. Red is set to ambush him, but Anne's studied greeting to the gunman warns Steve. He then walks up to Haggin, saying, "Red, grab—or git!"

Part Two

CHAPTER VIII

Kindred Emotions

RENNEVANT'S blunt command seemed to startle Red Haggin, to drive a wedge of indecision into him. Remembering how he'd bullied other men, Anne watched him closely and felt a surge of satisfaction. Steve Rennevant was ramming Red's reputation down his throat; was deliberately inviting him to fight!

Turk Gallego came through the batwings and stood just clear of them peering briefly at Rennevant. He said something to Haggin, speaking so softly that the words didn't carry across the street. Then he went back into the saloon.

Rennevant kept watching Haggin; kept waiting for him to make up his mind. He asked finally, "Well, what's it going to be?"

The fingers of Haggin's right hand eased an inch closer to his gun. Anne thought: "Now he's going to grab and he's awfully fast!"

Doc Dineen came downstairs. "That brother of yours is too tough to die," the medico reported. "He just smiled at Kate."

"Swell!" Anne exclaimed, and motioning for Dineen to join her, said warningly, "Don't go out just now, Doc. There may be some shooting."

Rennevant took out his Durham sack, using his left hand for this chore. When he lifted the tobacco sack to his teeth and

pulled it open, Doc Dineen exclaimed, "The darn fool is fixing to roll a cigarette!"

Anne didn't speak, and for a moment she didn't breath. She just stood there watching Red Haggin's right hand, expecting to see it flash up with a blasting gun. For a seemingly endless interval while Haggin stood like a crouched statue, the street became so quiet that Anne could hear the murmur of voices in Bob's room upstairs. Someone came along the hall, started down the stairs. . . .

Then Rennevant called proddingly, "Come on, come on. Play or pass!"

Red Haggin passed. He sidestepped to the batwings and backed through them like a clown leaving a stage. Whereupon Anne sighed and smiled and, turning toward the stairway, saw Pete Modesto looking pale and sick as he always looked in the morning. The old gambler went out and crossed the street, scarcely noticing Rennevant. Down at the livery stable Hooligan slapped his knee with the steel hook which served him for a right hand, and wincing at the impact, blurted, "The redhead turned tail, bejasus!"

A few doors up the street a mystified barber stood goggle-eyed. Over in the mercantile doorway Mayor Matabelle loosed a gasp of utter astonishment and Jules Larson exclaimed, "There's the man we need, John—a professional gunman!"

Doc Dineen came out of the hotel and peered over his glasses at Rennevant. "That was Kettledrum Basin's bad boy you were talking to," he said. "Nobody hereabouts ever talked to Red like that before and got away with it."

Rennevant chuckled, and going into the hotel, found Anne waiting for him in the lobby.

She said smilingly, "You play rough, don't you, Steve Rennevant?"

Again, as last night, confusion disrupted the orderly run of Rennevant's thoughts. But he managed to ask, "How's your brother this morning?"

"Bob is going to live," she declared happily. "Even Doc Dineen agrees with me now." Then she said, "Dad tells me you turned down his offer of a job."

"Yes," Rennevant acknowledged, and decided that her eyes were dark hazel. "I've got other plans."

She asked, "Wouldn't your plans permit you to ride for Dad until my brother gets well enough to ride?"

"Well, not exactly," Rennevant muttered. "I'm sorry for your father, being in such a fix. But—well, you see ma'am, my gun isn't for hire."

"I know you're not a professional gunhawk," she said quickly.

"How would you know that?" Rennevant asked, and saw embarrassment put a rose stain in her cheeks.

"I—I sensed it last night when you stood in the hall," she said in a hushed, confessional voice. "I don't know what you are, Steve Rennevant, but you're no hired killer. I'm sure of that."

Something in the words, and the way she said them, put a high flare of satisfaction into Rennevant. For upwards of five years men had called him a merciless killer, a tin-star slug-slammer without mercy or tolerance. They'd given his gun skill grudging respect, but they'd shunned him as a man apart from other men. Yet this warm-eyed girl was saying she knew he was something more than a grisly pariah!

And she was plucking at his sleeve, saying softly, urgently, "Won't you give us a hand, for just a little while? We've got to chouse Bannerman's cattle off our grass before they eat up our winter graze, and we've got to rebuild five miles of drift fence."

Even then, with the sense of her fingers on his arm stirring his pulse to faster rhythm, Rennevant had no intention of granting her request. Hell, a man couldn't let a girl's soft words and glowing eyes interfere with duty—even though she'd saved him from Haggin's sneak play a few minutes ago. Then abruptly it occurred to him that he wouldn't be leaving this country for at least two weeks, perhaps longer. If he remained here without working someone might suspect he was a badge-toter and spoil his chance of corralling the Hallmark gang.

Anne spoke again, still in that low, confessing tone. "I never was really afraid in my life until last night when Dad went into the Border Belle," she said. "I'd never

known what fear was like. But I know now."

Rennevant fingered his sweat-stained hat. He kept seeing all the things in Anne that he'd ever dreamed of seeing in a girl. And because he knew that a man-hunting lawdog had no right to romantic notions, he damned himself for seeing them.

"All right," he said finally. "I'll ride for your father, just as a cowhand and not as a gun-rider. And I'm only staying a couple of weeks. Please remember that, ma'am."

A quick smile curved her fulsome lips. She reached out and took his hand and said, "I will. I'll remember our bargain, Steve. And from now don't call me ma'am. My name is Anne."

The intimate tone of her voice and the pressure of her slim fingers affected him tremendously. They put an emotion in him different from anything he'd ever felt.

"All right, Anne," he said softly.

For a brief moment then, while they stood with eyes in close communion, Steve Rennevant understood why countless men had fought and toiled and died for the women of their choice. Remembering that Dan Bannerman had endeavored to win this girl, he understood Diamond Dan's insistent desire to possess her. Here was completeness for a man; here were warmth and beauty and fragrance—a living shrine to worship and sustain.

And because all his perceptions were keyed to this fleeting, flawless clarity, Rennevant sensed a kindred emotion in Anne; knew without question that she shared some portion of the rising flame inside him. As if in frank admission to that fact, her fingers tugged gently for release and she said, "Please, Steve."

Her voice was low, little more than a whisper. But the throb of suppressed excitement in it showed how surely she shared the emotion she'd aroused in him, how high a flame they had kindled together.

He released her fingers and when she said, "It's cooler outside," went with her to the tree-shaded bench at the far end of the veranda.

Presently he asked, "Why is Bannerman so set on owning Anvil?"

"Because he's a born range hog," Anne said. "Anvil and the Homestead Hills would give Double D a clean sweep to the Mexican Border. If Bannerman owned Anvil he'd crowd the small outfits from the Homestead Hills and have graze enough to run the biggest bunch of cattle in Arizona Territory."

"Well," Rennevant drawled, "it's not a new idea. According to the Bible they had range-grabbing trouble way back when the Israelites were running cattle on the mesa land east of Jerusalem. I don't know whether those old-time cowpokes used center-fire saddles or double rigs, but they had the same ideas about grass and water."

Anne eyed him wonderingly. "I would never have guessed you were a Bible reader," she said.

"I'm not. But my father was a religious man."

An old bitterness edged Rennevant's voice as he added, "My father believed in the Bible, and came as close to following it as a cowman could, but he died cussing the thieves that shot him."

"Is that why you take pleasure in fighting men like Red Haggin?" she asked. "Because you don't like thieves?"

"I hate 'em," Rennevant said flatly. "I hate the very sight and shape of a thief."

CHAPTER IX

Something to Remember

MAYOR MATABELLE came across the veranda and spoke to Anne. Rennevant made ready to leave, but the mayor asked, "Are you going to ride for Anvil?"

Rennevant nodded, giving the old merchant a deliberate appraisal.

"Then I want you to hear what I've got to say," Matabelle declared and joined them on the bench. "I've tried to stay clear of range squabbles," he said. "But it looks like we'll never have any peace around here until Dan Bannerman is chopped down to size. He's trying to talk Tate Kiley into foreclosing mortgages on five Pool ranches and wants Tate to sell them to him at half their real value. Tate doesn't want to do it, but the bank is over-

loaned and can't finance a holdout fight against Double D."

"What," Anne inquired, "has that to do with us? Dad tried to tell Larson's bunch six months ago what would happen. But they wouldn't help him buck Bannerman."

Matabelle sighed wearily. "I know," he muttered. "We all thought Jeff was just stirring up trouble for no good reason. We didn't believe Bannerman would try to hog the whole basin. I don't like to see range war come—but I'm not going to sit by and let Bannerman get control of our bank and everything else in this town. So I've decided to back the Pool with whatever money is needed to fight Bannerman's bunch to a finish, no matter how long it takes. Jules Larson says his members will all swing into line with your father—if Rennevant will rod the fight against Double D."

A quick smile curved Anne's lips, but Rennevant didn't smile. He asked moodily. "Why do they want me in on the deal?"

"Because you stood off Bannerman's toughs in the saloon last night, and bluffed Red Haggin into quitting like a yellow dog this morning," Matabelle explained.

He glanced at Rennevant's tied-down holster and said slyly, "They want one gunslick on their side, somebody who knows the tricks of the trade."

A cynical grin twisted Rennevant's lips. Here it was again; the same old grudging respect for his skill with a gun, for a grisly pariah who knew the tricks of the trade. This peace-loving old merchant would never guess the price a man paid to learn those tricks. He wouldn't know how lonesome a drifting badge-toter could get, nor how many times the cold fingers of fear clawed at a gunfighter's innards when the odds stacked up.

Recalling how Jeff Cruzatte had refused Larson's advice in the saloon last night, Rennevant turned to Anne, said, "Your father told Larson he wanted no truck with the Pool bunch at all."

"But this is different," Anne exclaimed. "This is a chance to save Anvil!"

Matabelle asked, "Will you run the show, Rennevant?"

Which was a question Rennevant didn't like to answer. Siding a bankrupt old cowman for a couple of weeks was one thing; leading an organization in bloody range war was something quite different—something a deputy marshal had no right to do. Finally he said, "Reckon I'd better talk it over with Jeff Cruzatte first."

Whereupon Anne declared, "We'll drive out to Anvil right now. I can hardly wait to tell Dad."

Afterward, when she had rented a rig at Hooligan's Livery and Rennevant had stowed his riding gear in back, Anne drove out of San Sureño at a fast trot, feeling happier than she'd felt in months.

"I'm sure Dad will join the Pool," she said. "He's called them a cowardly, no-good bunch time and again, but that was because they wouldn't fight."

"So," Rennevant mused, eyeing the country ahead with a drifter's strict attention for landmarks.

Watching him, Anne tried to guess his age. Right now, with a sober straightness to his lips and his sun-puckered eyes questing the slopes of Sashay Ridge, he had the mature look of a man who'd wandered a long time in many places. Yet when he grinned he looked no older than Bob, who was twenty-four.

She said softly, "A *centavo* for your thoughts," and watched the quick change in his eyes.

"Not worth it," he muttered, digging out his Durham sack. Then, as his fingers shaped up a cigarette with practiced skill, he told her about Rowdy.

Even though he spoke no definite word of affection for his horse, the controlled emotion in his voice showed how close a comradeship there'd been between them. Which was another link in Anne's forming chain of impressions. He loved horses; he had voiced a deep-rooted hatred for thieves, and he'd risked his life to save her father from almost certain death last night. It all added up to her first hasty, half-formed impression—that despite his toughness and his skill with guns, this wary-eyed rider was thoroughly honest. And perhaps a trifle lonely. . . .

"I'll pay Hallmark for taking his spite out on Rowdy," Rennevant said, "and I'll do it with my fists. Shooting is too good for that kind of snake."

"Shooting," Anne reflected cynically, "is too good for most of that Double D bunch. They'd have been hanged long ago if law badges were worth the tin they're made of."

Rennevant asked slyly, "You don't think much of badge-toters, do you, Anne?"

"I do not!" she said emphatically.

Rennevant grinned, and for a time, while the rig clattered up the long, rocky slope of Sashay Ridge, they rode in silence. He covertly studied Anne's profile at intervals, knowing that she was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen and wanting to have a permanent picture of her in his mind—something to remember on lonely nights.

At the crest of the ridge Anne halted the horse for a brief rest and Rennevant asked, "Just what does Matabelle stand to win by backing the fight against Double D."

"Nothing, except that beating Bannerman would make San Sureño a decent town to live in," Anne explained.

"Never knew a politician who wasn't trying to get something for himself," Rennevant said, "money or power, or glory."

Anne laughed. "But you don't know John Matabelle. He's been mayor so long he looks on San Sureño as his personal property, and he doesn't want it to get a bad reputation in the Territory."

Rennevant shrugged, said slowly, "Well, I don't like to get mixed up in a range war," and was searching for words to explain his reluctance when Anne's fingers gripped his arm.

"I wish you would," she said urgently.

The feel of those slim fingers disrupted Rennevant's disciplined thinking. They roused a richer awareness of her presence; made him sense again how surely she shared the strong run of emotion he felt. Her face was turned toward him now so that he could see the full sweet curve of her lips. They parted slightly as he watched and whispered, "I wish you would, Steve."

Something flared up in Rennevant then; something he couldn't control. He said, "All right—all right," and putting his arms around her, added rashly, "There's something else I'd like to do."

"I—I wish you would," Anne whispered again, and was gently smiling when he kissed her.

For a timeless interval their lips met and merged and sheer ecstacy had its way with Steve Rennevant. It was as if this girl had always belonged to him; as if she'd never been a stranger. Here was completeness beyond compare, for her lips were giving him more than surrender. They were answering gladly, generously, with all the wild sweet flavor of a girl in love. And because she was so close and yielding against him, the beating of her heart was like his own heart beating.

Presently Anne murmured, "Please," and he released her. She took a moment to rearrange her tumbled hair, and in this brief interval of silence they both heard the thudding tromp of a hard-ridden horse behind them. . . .

CHAPTER X

"Lady-Chasin' Dude!"

JULES LARSON strode out of Matabelle's Mercantile with a broad smile on his angular, weather-beaten face. "I'll back your Pool to the limit," the mayor had just told him, "and I believe you'll have Steve Rennevant for a gun boss."

That meant the waiting was over. It meant an end to the women's talk of patience; of hungry kids and empty guns. No more shameful side-stepping when Bannerman's brazen riders pushed Double D steers through the Homestead Hills; no more coward-calling by Jeff Cruzatte. With Matabelle furnishing food for their families and ammunition for their guns, every member of the Pool would fight—gladly. And with a topnotch gunman like Rennevant to lead them, they'd win. . . .

Hurriedly, in the fashion of a man with important news, Larson went down Border Belle Alley to the blacksmith shop where Alex Engle was having a buckboard repaired. "Matabelle backs us to the limit," he told the young cowman. "Anne Cruzatte just left for Anvil and Steve Rennevant went with her."

"Good!" Engle exclaimed, a rash smile dimpling his round, boyish face. "I'll pass the word to Jim Highbaugh and Luke

Yancey on my way home. You tell the others."

Larson nodded, said, "The waiting is done, Alex. Now we fight!"

He went back up the alley and was passing the open doorway at the rear of the Border Belle when he heard Dan Bannerman's angry voice. "Swear in Red and Turk as deputies," the big man bellowed. "And arrest Rennevant before he reaches Anvil!"

Then Sheriff Shumway's voice asking: "What charge will I arrest him on?"

"Robbery, rustling—anything. Only be damned sure he gets killed resisting arrest!"

The sheriff spoke again, but Larson didn't wait to hear any more. Turning abruptly through the Wells Fargo wagon yard, he ran to Hooligan's stable, saddled his horse and rode out of town. And because Rennevant's death now would be a tragic blow to the Pool's chances for victory, he urged the bronc to a hard run.

For a time, while Larson galloped through the greasewood breaks west of San Sureño, he failed to sight the livery rig. Glancing back at frequent intervals and seeing no sign of riders behind him, he felt a growing optimism. There might be a chance for the rig to race to Anvil ahead of the posse, if he warned Rennevant in time. . . .

But when he glanced back again, his hope died instantly. A plume of dust was boiling above three riders on the road just west of town; and a moment later, as Larson crossed a secondary ridge, he saw the livery rig topping the summit ahead of him. That meant there wouldn't be a chance for the rig to outrun the posse. Not a glimmer of a chance!

Spurring his horse up Sashay Ridge, Larson overtook the buggy and blurted out his warning. When Rennevant showed no sign of apprehension, he added nervously, "They're coming fast!"

"So," Rennevant mused, and glanced speculatively at Larson's rat-tailed roan. Then he said, "I hear you want me to ramrod the fight against Double D."

"We do," Larson exclaimed. "We are depending on it."

"Then I'll start right now—by borrowing your bronc," Rennevant said, getting down from the rig. "I'll use my own saddle. Always feel better with my own saddle under me; more used to it."

Larson said, "Sure," and hastily stripped his gear from the panting bronc.

"What you planning to do, Steve?" Anne asked.

Rennevant grinned—a reckless, boyish grin that reminded her of Bob.

"I'm going back and meet Bannerman's posse," he said, lifting his saddle from the rear of the rig.

Watching him, Anne thought she knew why he was a drifter. He had a fighter's relish for conflict. It showed in his grin, and in the way his eyes turned smoky blue at times like this. Yet he hadn't wanted to get mixed up in a range war, and that seemed strange.

Rennevant climbed into saddle and drawing a Winchester from its scabbard, said, "I've got something here that'll slow those three dudes down a bit—while you folks drive to the ranch."

Then he asked, "Just where is Anvil from here?"

Anne pointed west, toward the Rampart Mountains. "Use that high chimney peak for a marker, Steve. Anvil is three miles due east of it. This is Sashay Ridge. It angles northwest into the Homestead Hills, which separate Anvil and Double D range."

"Just like handing me a map," Rennevant drawled and rode back across the ridge.

Anne called, "Good luck, Steve."

"Thanks," he said and just before he rode over the rim, added grinningly, "See you at supper time, Anne."

Jules Larson rubbed his sweat-stained face. "A born gunman, that Rennevant," he declared. "No normal feelin's at all! That's what makes his gunnin' so good."

Remembering Steve's ardent embrace and the hungry way he'd kissed her a few moments ago, Anne smiled secretively. "He's a first-class fighting man," she murmured, "but he has feelings too—real feelings."

Which was something for Jules Larson to puzzle out as he drove the livery rig toward Anvil. . . .

RIDING a little distance down the east slope of the ridge, Rennevant eased the roan out onto a projecting ledge and had his look at the country below. Nothing showed in the greasewood breaks, and for a brief interval he failed to distinguish a sign of movement on the tilted, harpin turns of the road. But presently a thin dust haze drifted above a hidden switchback and a moment later three riders appeared, coming up the road at a trot.

Sun glare reflected sharply on Shumway's law badge; it put a shine on Turk Gallego's dark, perspiring face and brightened the ruddy stubble of whiskers on Red Haggin's heavy cheeks. They were less than half a mile away, their sweat-lathered broncs showing how fast they'd made the run from San Sureño. Giving their gear a prolonged study, Rennevant decided that Gallego and Haggin both had rifles in saddle scabbards. He couldn't be sure about the sheriff.

And at this moment Haggin peered up at him, halted instantly and snatched out his saddle gun. Whereupon Rennevant fired. . . .

That first shot spooked Larson's bronc into a tantrum. It also sent those three riders scampering for cover on both sides of the road. Rennevant took time to quiet the roan; he heard Sheriff Shumway yell: "It's Rennevant!" and heard the nearby sizzle of a slug before the rifle's report drifted up to him. He spotted Shumway and tried to target the dodging sheriff with two shots, but the fiddle-footed roan made accurate shooting impossible. One of those guns below was sending slugs too close for comfort. A bullet whanged within inches of his head; another spattered off a boulder less than a yard away. It was time to move!

Whirling the roan, Rennevant headed northward along the ledge, purposely remaining in sight so that the men below could see the direction of his departure. Red Haggin had dismounted and was taking time for deliberate aim. Gallego was rushing his horse along the slope, evidently intending to cut him off from town. And Sheriff Shumway was now riding up the road to come in behind him.

Whereupon Rennevant grinned and urged his horse to a faster pace. They were a crafty trio, those three, wise in the ways of backtrail fighting. But he knew a few tricks himself, even though this was the first time he'd ever been on the dodging end of a chase. . . .

Angling up to the summit, Rennevant went northward. This, he decided, was a good chance to have a look at the Homestead Hills, and if the Double D crew were pushing cattle onto Anvil range again today he might meet up with Whitey Hallmark. Remembering how blood had spurted from Rowdy's front feet this morning, Rennevant felt the same shocked anger he'd felt at Hooligan's stable. And a familiar, itching urge for vengeance.

Presently quartering into a trail, Rennevant followed it into a deep canyon that notched the ridge. The runoff from last night's rain had formed a sizeable creek at which he watered the roan and took a drink himself. Then, listening for sound of pursuit and hearing the remote rumor of running horses, he splashed downstream for nearly three miles, until he found a pool where a bunch of range broncs had recently drunk. Here he turned north again, the roan's hoofprints merging with a jumble of fresh tracks that pocked the muddy bank.

"Only an Injun could track us out of here," Rennevant mused and crossing the canyon, headed upridge at an angle that brought him back into the summit trail at noon.

The ridge here was covered with live oak and thickets of manzanita. Climbing a high outcrop of rock, Rennevant scouted his backtrail, seeing no sign of the three-man posse. Eastward the land dropped down to brush-blotched flats that ran all the way back to the base of Cascabelle Divide. West of him Anvil range was a hazy sprawl of long mesas and wide valleys stretching west to the Ramparts and north to the timbered slopes of the Homestead Hills.

Squinting his eyes against the sun's harsh glare, Rennevant tallied the chimney peak Anne had pointed out, then scanned the country east of it until he picked up the far-off flash of a sun-glinted windmill. The distance was too great for him to distinguish more than a vague outline of build-

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ings and corrals; but this remote view gave him a chance to charter Anvil's exact relation to other landmarks so that he'd have no trouble reaching it.

He was debating the advisability of riding that way now when he noticed a high haze of dust to the northeast. The wooded hills hid whatever was below the dust, but the thought came to Rennevant that it might be another drive of Double D steers toward Anvil. If it was, Whitey Hallmark would be bossing it. So thinking, Rennevant put his mount to a swift run northward.

The trail dipped occasionally, winding through ravines and crossing dry washes, but mostly its course was northward, toward the continuing dust haze. Within three miles the manzanita and oak gave way to parade-like stands of wind-twisted pine, and soon after that Rennevant halted on a timbered hill directly above a homestead clearing. Upwards of two hundred steers were being driven through the clearing by five riders, the cattle passing between a new log house and a pole corral.

This, then, was the way Bannerman was planning to force Jeff Cruzatte off Anvil—by crowding Anvil graze, devastating what little grass remained after the recently ended drouth. And because the Pool members had refused to fight, Double D used their range for a cattle trail to Anvil.

Eagerly, like a lobo keening for quarry, Rennevant studied the faces of the dust-hazed riders below him, seeking Whitey Hallmark—not finding him as the herd tromped by the homestead and passed on into the timber. Then a shrill voice drifted up from the house, and glancing that way he saw Hallmark grappling with a gingham-clad girl!

Rennevant went down the wooded slope at a run. Pine needles here made a thick carpet that muffled the bronc's hoofbeats, and because Hallmark's attention was completely centered on the struggling, sobbing girl, he failed to see Rennevant dismount beside the house.

"A few kisses won't kill you," Hallmark was saying insistently.

He forced the girl back against the door-

frame, hard enough to tumble her high-coiled hair into loose disorder. He held her so she couldn't dodge his passion-pouted lips. But the kiss was brief. . . .

Rennevant grasped Hallmark's shoulder, jerked him around and bashed his nose with a short-arcing jab. Then, as Hallmark cursed and grabbed for his gun, Rennevant hit him hard on the chin.

The Double D foreman forgot about his gun. He staggered back in loose-jointed confusion. He ducked Rennevant's next blow and took a teetering step sideways, like a drunkard at a dance.

"Fight, you lady-chasin' dude!" Rennevant growled contemptuously.

His hate was a flame inside him, a high, hot flame that turned him savage. He rushed Hallmark with both fists, battered down the guarding arms and smashed him in the face. Hallmark's knees sagged and he started to go down, but Rennevant reached out and grasped the front of Hallmark's shirt. He punched him in the stomach, propped him up and punched his slack-lipped mouth. Then, deliberately measuring Hallmark's bloody, blank-eyed face, Rennevant hit him with a long looping right flush to the jaw. Whereupon Whitey went down—and out.

For a moment the silence was broken only by the girl's soft sobbing. She was small and dark-haired with a graphic, girlish beauty. She stared at Hallmark's motionless form as if still fearing him. Then she glanced at Rennevant and said, "He did the same thing last week. I didn't tell my husband, but I will now."

Rennevant wiped his bloody knuckles on his pants. He stooped down, unbuckled Hallmark's gun gear and handed it to the girl. "A gun and bullets make good companions when you're alone," he said quietly.

The girl was trembling, so near physical exhaustion that the holstered gun and belt seemed almost too heavy for her to hold. She said, "Thanks for your help," and smiled up at him through tear-misted eyes. "Thanks a lot."

"Who is your husband?" Rennevant inquired.

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"Alex Engle. He's in town with my father, Jules Larson."

Rennevant chuckled. Fate, he reflected, was still playing tricks. He said, "You don't owe me any thanks, ma'am. Your father's warning probably saved my life a couple hours ago."

"How strange," Mrs. Engle exclaimed, then added reverently, "Providence must have had a hand in it."

"Mebbeso," Rennevant mused and glancing at Hallmark, saw that his boots were moving.

Those boots, he noticed then, were brand new; so new their soles were scarcely marked at all. New, high-heeled boots with fancy stitching and stiff, unscuffed soles. . . .

A kind of brutal anticipation took hold of him as he watched the Double D ramrod regain consciousness. It replaced the urgent need for conflict in him, the need Hallmark had cheated by refusing to fight.

Turning to Mrs. Engle he said, "You'd better go into the house and stay there until your husband returns, ma'am. And if any Double D riders come asking about Whitey, just tell them he rode off with a galoot named Steve Rennevant."

Then, as Hallmark got slowly to his feet, Rennevant walked over to him and said savagely, "Fork your bronco, Romeo, we're taking a little *pasear*."

"Where to?" Hallmark demanded.

"To the Double D," Rennevant muttered, "or in that general direction."

Then he shoved Hallmark toward his bronc.

CHAPTER XI

Drifter's Dream

TWO miles northwest of Engle's homestead Rennevant called an order to Whitey Hallmark who rode directly ahead of him: "Get down."

This was a rock-studded strip of tableland hemmed in on all sides by rearing, wooded hills and far enough from the cattle trail so there'd be no likelihood of meeting Double D riders. It suited Rennevant's purpose perfectly.

Hallmark's bashed nose was still bleeding. He kept wiping it on his sleeve, smearing blood across his swollen jaw. "What you aimin' to do?" he demanded thickly through puffed, broken lips.

Rennevant ignored the question. He said, "Turn around," and when Whitey hesitated, knocked him around with a jolt on the shoulder.

"I didn't do nothin' but kiss her," Hallmark whined. "I wasn't plannin' her no harm."

"You got paid off for that at the homestead." Rennevant said, tying Hallmark's hands securely behind him. "This is something else, Whitey. This is to show you how a horse feels with two nail-punctured feet."

That silenced the Double D foreman, bringing no denial. But when Rennevant unbridled Hallmark's horse and shooed it off with a slap on the rump, the scar-faced rider blurted: "It's eighteen miles to Double D!"

"Yeah," Rennevant grunted and getting into saddle, slacked out a few feet of rope.

"You figgerin' to make me walk it?" Hallmark demanded.

"Yeah," Rennevant said again. "Move on."

"But I'm wearin' new boots," Whitey complained. "This is the first time I wore 'em."

"So I noticed," Rennevant acknowledged, and when Hallmark stubbornly refused to move, touched spurs to his mount.

The roan lunged forward. The rope snapped taut, Whitey Hallmark yelped. But he didn't go down. He ran behind the roan like a well broke pack horse. . . .

That was the way it started, this strange *pasear* toward Double D. And although Rennevant soon pulled the bronc down to a walk, there was no stopping for rests, nor for water at occasional gullies, nor for a looksee on the many ridges they topped. Steadily and silently, except for the one time he inquired the direction of Double D, Rennevant rode northward. And because Whitey Hallmark had a rider's frenzied fear of being dragged to death, he walked fast enough to keep a margin of slack in the rope. Walked, and limped, and finally shambled like a sore-footed steer. Mile after mile, until each staggering step

was agony—until the stones he stepped on were like nails driven into his blistered feet.

Twice Hallmark stumbled and fell and scrambled up in panic-prodded haste. It was mid-afternoon now, with sun glare burning down at full heat, sucking the moisture from Hallmark's sweat-stained shirt. Presently he fell a third time, whereupon Rennevant dismounted.

"Reckon mebbe you know how my hoss felt this morning," he muttered and turned Hallmark loose.

The Double D foreman had gotten up quickly. But now he sat down. His amber eyes were hot with a futile, festering resentment that was close to turning him berserk. He opened his lips as if to vent the venom of his hate, but he clamped them shut again without speaking.

Rennevant grinned, and remembering the handcuffs in his saddle bags, felt tempted to arrest Hallmark here and now. But that would expose him as a badge-toter and he wasn't ready for that yet. . . .

So he said dryly, "I'll be seeing you again, Whitey. And I'll be teaching you another lesson. You'll be a well educated galoot when I get through with you."

Then he turned west, circling his backtrail as a precaution against running into the posse. Crossing an open summit he saw another homestead clearing; another log house and corral. A woman in a poke bonnet was spading a garden plot near the house, and a little girl with bright red ribbons in her hair was playing with a puppy on the shaded stoop.

Watching that tranquil scene and knowing how hugely range war would change it, Rennevant felt a futile regret. It seemed almost impossible that this country was on the thin edge of bloody conflict, that these hushed hills would soon resound to the crash of guns and the curses of dying men. Yet even at this moment all the ingredients of hate and greed and violence were in these hills. Five gunhung riders were pushing cattle onto Anvil grass. Whitey Hallmark was limping toward Double D with a bloodlust brew of hate running hot in his veins. And somewhere, perhaps over the next ridge, a three-man posse stalked.

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No, there was no peace here. Just a temporary hush before the storm. Just a little time for playing with puppies on shaded stoops. . . .

Riding on down the slope, Rennevant skirted a meadow where cattle grazed. Instinctively checking their brands he saw a lot of Double D's, a few Y Drags, Pot Hooks, and some AE Connected which he guessed was Alex Engle's brand. The Pool cattle were mostly cows and calves; but the Double D's were all big steers with vented brands—the unreadable "bug" brands of Old Mexico. That meant they'd been brought across the Line, honestly or otherwise.

Recalling what Anne had told him about Anvil making a wide wedge between the Homestead Hills and the Border, Rennevant toyed with the suspicion that Diamond Dan Bannerman might want Anvil for something besides extra graze. If he was dealing with Mexican cattle thieves, this wedge of range would be priceless.

Rennevant was thinking about that when Turk Gallego stepped from behind a windfall with a leveled gun in his hand and said quietly, almost whisperingly: "Don't do anything foolish, friend."

Cursing himself for a careless fool, Rennevant eyed Gallego intently, wondering if Shumway and Haggin were nearby. If they weren't too close there might be a chance to ride this little man down, for he was less than five feet away.

But even as Rennevant made ready to jab spurs to the roan, Gallego said softly, "Don't do it, friend."

He came all the way out of the windfall, the reins of his bronc looped over his left arm. He eased off to one side, keeping his sharp eyes on Rennevant every instant, not lowering the gun nor relaxing the menace of its aimed muzzle.

There was a strangeness to this, and it tugged at the fringes of Rennevant's mind. Gallego could have ambushed him easily, without risk to himself. Right now he could release the gun's hammer and be positive its slug would slam through the Durham sack in Rennevant's shirt pocket. But Turk Gallego was waiting. For what?

Then Turk said something that further puzzled Rennevant. He said, "I don't know what your game is, friend, but you're living on borrowed time."

Still closely watching, he canted his head as if listening for expected sounds. And in this brief interval a startling thought struck Steve Rennevant, a possible explanation for Gallego's reluctance to end this deal swiftly and brutally, as Red Haggin would have ended it. Or Sheriff Shumway. Pete Modesto had said Gallego was new on Bannerman's payroll. Turk looked tough, and he probably was tough; but he didn't have the vicious look of a cold-blooded killer.

Rennevant relaxed in saddle. "What," he asked, "does that badge say you're wearing in your pocket?"

Gallego didn't lower the gun. And there was no visible change in the sober mask of his swarthy face when he said, "Border Patrol. What does yours say?"

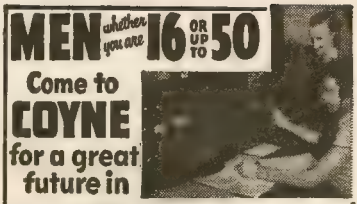
Rennevant chuckled, knowing that this little rider had guessed his lawman identity first. "Deputy U. S. Marshal," he drawled, and remembering how strongly Gallego had attracted his attention last night in the saloon, said amusedly, "You keep strange company, Turk. You do for a fact."

"Got my reasons," Gallego muttered and lowered the gun. He listened again, then said whisperingly, "Two herds of Sonora steers been smuggled across the Line in the last three months. I'm trying to find out when Double D plans to make another raid into Mexico."

So that was it! This taciturn little lawdog was playing a crafty, waiting game. And a dangerous one. If Bannerman so much as suspected his rôle, Gallego would die with a bullet in the back. And now, with open range war threatening, he'd be a target for Pool guns along with every Double D rider in these hills.

"Hell is going to pop around here soon," Rennevant warned. "You want me to tell my friends who you are, so they won't be shooting at you?"

"No," Turk said instantly. "Somebody might talk out of turn. Bannerman is about due to grab another herd of Sonora steers



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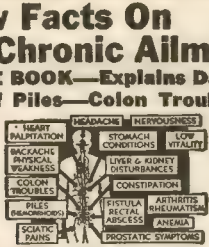

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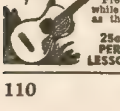

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and I want to get the deadwood on him this time."

Then he added, "You better make some tracks *muy pronto*, friend. Red and Shumway aren't far off."

Rennevant nodded. There were some questions he wanted to ask this man, but there wasn't time for it now. "Good luck," he said, and riding on through the trees, heard Gallego's bronc go up the slope at a lunging run. Turk, he reflected, would need a lot of luck to stay alive in this deal. . . .

Afterward, as Rennevant crossed a valley with good graze in its bottom, he saw a big bunch of Mexican steers mixed with slat-ribbed Anvil cows and scrawny calves. Keeping tab, he tallied five Double D brands for every Anvil, that ratio diminishing somewhat as he rode farther south. But three to one—even two to one—spelled eventual disaster for Cruzatte, who needed every blade of grass to nourish his drouth-famished stock. One month of overcrowding would ravage this range.

No wonder old Jeff had gone loco in San Sureño last night. Without a crew to push Bannerman's cattle back, he'd faced sure ruin. And although the Homestead Hills outfits faced the same fate, they had refused to fight. But they were going to fight now, and Rennevant was idly formulating a plan for the coming conflict when he topped a bluff some three miles north of Anvil.

Here he halted, having his first clear view of Cruzatte's home quarters, seeing a spacious, L-shaped 'dobe house with its gallery facing east. A bunkhouse, several sheds and an array of corrals were separated from the main building by a triangular compound. A huge cottonwood obscured one end of the gallery, and twin rows of pepper trees bordered the roadway that skirted a windmill tank on the south side of the house.

It was, Rennevant reflected, a fitting home for a saddle-warped old pioneer. A cow country palace to be proud of; a hard-won heritage to protect against the designs of greedy men. And because he'd been homeless as a stray dog for five rough-and-

tumble years, Steve Rennevant felt a sudden sense of loneliness. That house down there, and the log cabins back in the hills, were symbols of something accomplished—monuments to the men who'd built them. The poorest homesteader had a shack to come back to when the day's riding was done. He had a woman to share it, making it a home. But what did Steve Rennevant have to show for five year's riding? Just a lot of horse tracks in the dust.

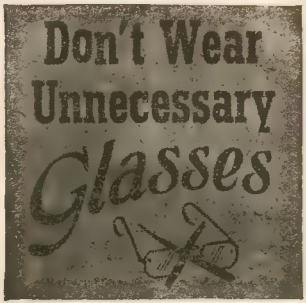
Remembering how Anne had kissed him up there on Sashay Ridge, Rennevant knew why this urgent sense of lack and loneliness had come at sight of Anvil. Anne was down there, her presence like a magnet attracting his attention, shaping his thoughts. And it would always be like this. No matter how far a distance lay between them, she would be the one full image of his desire—a constant, unwavering beacon across the long and lonely miles.

For the first time in his life Steve Rennevant took a look into the future. Sooner or later some noose-dodging thief would beat him to the draw, and even if that didn't happen until he was too old to care, it was a dreary picture. A man could take pride in the badge he wore and in reaping retribution for his dead father. But there came a time when that wasn't enough; and that time, he guessed, was almost here.

Perhaps, he mused, there might be another homestead in the hills when his law chore here was finished. A cozy, stout-walled home with curtains at the windows and a blonde goddess of a girl to welcome him when day's riding was done. . . .

AT DUSK Anne saw Rennevant ride into the yard. She had just taken a pan of biscuits from the oven. She stood at the window for a moment, seeing the ramrod straightness of his tall form in saddle, and feeling a quick surge of relief that he was all right. Then, as the hot pan burned through the towel which protected her hands, she hurriedly deposited the biscuits on the kitchen table.

Her father called a friendly greeting to Rennevant from the veranda and presently Anne heard the drone of their voices over



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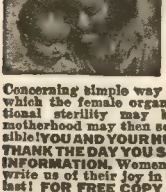

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at the horse corral. Jeff had been somewhat flabbergasted at the news that Matabelle was going to finance a showdown against Double D; so surprised and pleased that he'd discarded all his bitter resentment toward the Pool at once. He'd been downright jovial with Jules Larson and later, when Larson had borrowed a horse and ridden away, her father had called, "We'll show the Double D bunch, Jules, we'll show 'em good and proper!"

Now, Anne guessed, he was telling Rennevant about the plan he and Larson had discussed; the huge task of hazing Double D stock off Anvil and then cleaning it out of the Homestead Hills. It was almost dark when she went to the door and called, "Come and get it!"

A cool breeze ran down from the Ramparts and there was a hint of impending storm in the massed clouds above Sashay Ridge. But this lamplit kitchen was a cheerful room.

He said, "Hello Anne," and sniffing the food-scented air, added, "Sure smells good."

"Anne ain't much account in a kitchen," Cruzatte drawled with mock gravity, "but she'll do till I can git a Chinee cook."

Presently, when they were eating, Anne noticed fresh scars on Rennevant's knuckles. Recalling what he'd said about paying Hallmark off with his fists, she nodded at his hands and asked, "Did you meet Whitey?"

"Yeah," Rennevant admitted. "I met him."

He seemed reluctant to discuss the details, so Anne didn't press the subject. But he showed no reluctance about eating, nor in his praise when the meal was finished. "Best tasting supper I ever ate," he declared, almost soberly; and Anne knew he meant it.

Afterward, while she washed the dishes, Anne listened to Steve and her father discuss ways and means of waging war against Double D. "First thing is to git them danged Mex steers off my graze," old Jeff announced. "Then we'll have to chouse 'em out of the hills."

"You planning to drive them back to

Bannerman's range?" Rennevant inquired, puffing contentedly on the cigar Jeff had given him.

"Sure, where else would we drive 'em?"

"Well, I've got reason to believe they were smuggled out of Mexico," Rennevant said. "Seems like it would be easier to drive them south. That way you'd be doing three jobs at once; you'd be getting shut of them quicker, Bannerman would be losing them, and mebbe the rightful owners might get 'em back."

"By gosh, I never thought of that!" Cruzatte exclaimed, a quick smile warming his faded eyes. "Also, there'd be less Double D riders messin' up our drive."

Rennevant nodded, and presently asked, "How many men in Bannerman's crew?"

"Eighteen, not counting Shumway."

The talk ran on, covering all the angles of armed conflict; how much ammunition and supplies would be needed, which men would ride with Rennevant as roving gun guards while others worked cattle; how to meet the showdown fight when it came.

"We'll have twelve men, and mebbe two-three youngsters who'll do for cow chousin'," Cruzatte reported. "Seems like we got a real good chance of winnin'."

"A chance, anyway," Rennevant said. "But licking the Double D crew may not end the trouble. It's my hunch you could kill every rider on Bannerman's payroll and still not win."

Cruzatte didn't agree with that. "Diamond Dan," he declared, "is just one man. He's only as strong as his crew. Take that away from him and he's finished."

But later, when Anne sat with him on the gallery after Jeff had gone to bed, Rennevant voiced his hunch again. "There'll be no real peace in this country until Bannerman leaves it. And I know of only one thing that would make him leave it."

"A bullet?" Anne asked softly.

"Yeah," Rennevant drawled. "A bullet between the eyes."

Then, while a full moon played hide and seek with the high-banked clouds above Sashay Ridge, they talked of other, more pleasant things—and some of it was said without the use of words. . . .

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CHAPTER XII

"And a Lot of Dying!"

AT TEN o'clock that night Sheriff Shumway and Red Haggin rode leg-weary horses into San Sureño and reported to their boss. "Somebody tipped Rennevant off," Shumway declared. "He'd left the livery rig and was hossback when we went up Sashay Ridge."

"Did you get him?" Bannerman demanded.

The sheriff shook his head.

Bannerman slammed a half-smoked cigar into a cuspidore. "So Rennevant got away again!" he roared. "Three to one, and you let him slide through your fingers!"

"Somebody warned him we was comin'," Shumway alibied.

"What of it?" Bannerman demanded. "You got close enough to see him, didn't you?"

Both men nodded, at which Diamond Dan exclaimed, "What the hell you think I'm paying you big wages for—just to fancy dance through the hills admiring your shadows?"

Then he asked, "Where's Gallego?"

"We split up," Shumway explained, "tryin' to cut Rennevant's trail. Never did see Turk after that. We even stopped by the ranch, but he didn't show there neither. Whitey told us Rennevant jumped him from behind, beat hell out of him and took his horse. Whitey's face is a mess, and he blistered his feet all to hell, walkin' home."

"By God that's good!" Bannerman shouted. "Half my crew riding the hills and Rennevant makes monkeys of them all!"

"There's a thousand places for a man to hide in," Shumway protested. "You got to give us time to hunt him down, Dan."

Shumway's pride was hurt, and he showed it. But Red Haggin took Bannerman's denunciation with stolid indifference. "Somethin' queer about that Gallego galoot," he said. "Turk had a Winchester, but he never fired it at Rennevant. He

just hit a shuck off through the brush, like mebbe he was tryin' to head Rennevant off. But he didn't do no shootin'."

"Say," Shumway exclaimed, "somebody sent word ahead to Rennevant that we was comin' after him—and only us four knew about it."

"Yes," Bannerman mused, instantly interested. "Just us four."

He plucked a fresh cigar from his pocket and bit off its end with a savage snap of his big teeth. "That," he said thoughtfully, "might explain what happened yesterday. And it might explain why Rennevant came here."

He went to the door, opened it and gave the saloon a searching glance. Piano Pete was dealing stud to three players—an El Paso whiskey drummer, Fat Foster, the barkeep, and a clerk from the Mercantile. No sign of Gallego.

Bannerman turned to Haggin, said impatiently, "Go get two fresh horses from the stable. We're riding to the ranch right now."

"How about me?" Shumway asked.

"You stay here and keep your eyes open," Bannerman ordered. "If Gallego comes in, bring him to Double D. And if you see Rennevant—shoot him!"

They went out through the saloon to the street then and the Mercantile clerk said secretively, "Wait till Diamond Dan hears the news."

Piano Pete tried to break up that talk by raising the pot ten dollars on a jack of hearts. "Come on," he urged, "let's play poker."

But Fat Foster asked again, "What news you talking about, Gebbert?"

"Mayor John is backing the Pool with wide open credit," the clerk declared. "Those Hills boys will be well heeled with bullets from now on."

"You sure about that?" the barkeep demanded.

"Sure I'm sure."

Foster pushed back his chair and went out to the stoop at a ponderous, waddling run. But Bannerman was already riding away from the stable with Red Haggin. . . .

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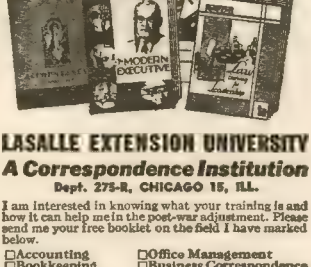

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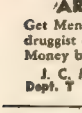
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tel, Doc Dineen came downstairs and found Kate Carmody waiting with an unspoken question in her Irish eyes.

"Anne was right," the medico declared. "Bob won't be crippled. He'll be right as rain in no time at all."

Whereupon Kate let out a little squeal of happiness and kissed Doc's pudgy cheek. . . .

Up on Society Hill Mayor Matabelle was playing a final game of dominoes with his wife, and out at Double D Turk Gallego gave Whitey Hallmark a two-word explanation for his late arrival.

"Got lost," the dark-faced little rider said flatly.

During the next forty-eight hours a radical change took place in the Homestead Hills. Men who for months had advertised their peaceful intention by riding unarmed suddenly sprouted Colt-filled holsters. They rode with a new look in their eyes. Even their talk was different, taking on the aggressive tone of fighting men. And although their womenfolk watched this change with dread and foreboding, more than one wife looked upon her husband with new respect.

In less than two day's time the Pool-Anvil combination was completely organized and men were riding toward the appointed meeting place with extra horses for the grueling job ahead. From West Creek and Blackjack Canyon they came; from Burnt Meadow and Sombrero Butte and the Pot Holes—all heading for Jules Larson's J Bar L. Here, at the northern fringe of the Homestead Hills, the drive would start; and here Steve Rennevant's roving patrol against Double D raiders would make its headquarters.

Soon after sunup of the second day, Rennevant hazed ten broncs northward from Anvil. Behind him, in the ranchyard, Anne Cruzatte helped her father hook a four-horse hitch to the chuck wagon. Jeff was going to San Sureño for provisions and would reach J Bar L sometime before dark. Anne, despite her urgent desire to make a hand at the roundup, was going to remain in town with her brother Bob.

When Rennevant rimmed the mesa north of Anvil he glanced back and saw Anne

wave to him. He couldn't distinguish her features from this distance, but he knew she'd be smiling and he knew exactly how the smile would curve her lips and fashion twin dimples in her cheeks. And so he grinned, and rode on across the mesa like a man with pictures in his mind, and five hours later choused the broncs into Larson's corral.

Alex Engle and his wife had already arrived. When the young husband tried to thank Rennevant for "stompin' that low-livered snake Hallmark," Rennevant said, "Can't use any thanks, Alex—but I could use a guide for a looksee at the range north of here."

"Sure," Engle said eagerly, "I'll be proud to show you. And I know a perfect lookout spot for keeping tabs on Double D."

Whereupon he proved it by taking Rennevant up the brush-tangled summit above Pyramid Pass, northern gateway to the hills.

Soon after they'd ridden off, Ed Wales arrived. Then Ollie Shannon rode in with his two teen-age sons, and an hour later Jim Highbaugh, Luke Yancey and Sam Stoval came, driving eight loose broncs ahead of them. Late in the afternoon Jeff Cruzatte wheeled into the yard with the Anvil chuck wagon piled high with provisions, extra Winchesters and ammunition.

"Makes a man feel young again," he declared grinningly, and shook hands with men he hadn't spoken to for months.

Soon after that Gabe Lee, oldest settler in the hills, rode in with his son-in-law, big, broad-chested Pete Meadows, and they were soon followed by the two Logan brothers, who completed the Pool membership.

At dusk, when Rennevant returned with Engle, he glanced reflectively at the campfire where Mrs. Larson and her daughter were helping old Gabe Lee prepare a chuck-wagon supper. The smell of Dutch-oven cooking made him remember the last round-up he'd ridden with his father, back in Texas seven years ago. There'd been no hate in him then, nor any notches on his gun. . . .

Rennevant was thinking about that when Jeff Cruzatte called, "Come on over here where the boys can git a look at you, Steve," and ushered Rennevant into the circle of firelight. "Here's our gun boss, the gent who made Bannerman's slug-slammers shiver in their boots!"

Rennevant's face turned ruddy. An old resentment stirred in him and for a long moment he stood moodily silent. Every man in the group seemed to be looking at him as if he were some sort of gunslick freak.

"Tell us how you want the work done," Jules Larson invited.

Rennevant shook his head. "The brush-poppin' is up to you and Jeff," he said bluntly. "Give me four men and I'll try to keep Bannerman's bunch from interfering with your work."

"Who do you want to ride with you?" Alex Engle asked, eagerness brightening his eyes.

"You, for one," Rennevant said. Then he chose lean, lantern-jawed Jim Highbaugh; Luke Yancey who was also on the lean, long-geared side, and big Pete Meadows.

"It's going to be rough," Rennevant warned. "I'd like that understood right now."

Ollie Shannon asked, "You reckon we're goin' to cut the mustard?"

Rennevant shrugged. "Mebbe yes, mebbe no," he muttered, and realizing that some of these men probably wouldn't live to see the roundup finished, added soberly, "It'll take some doing."

"A tol'able lot of doin'," Gabe Lee called from across the campfire.

"And a lot of dying," Mrs. Larson phophesied.

For a long moment then, as Mrs. Larson's words cast their spell on the group, there was a thoughtful silence. It occurred to Rennevant that most of these men had never drawn a gun against another man. No wonder they'd been afraid to buck Bannerman's gunslick riders; no wonder they'd waited until there seemed no other way of survival. And now that they'd decided to fight, what chance would they have?

As if in answer to that question, there was the rushing thud of hard-run horses at the edge of the clearing and a man's high-pitched yell: "Here comes company!"

"Get away from the fire," Rennevant warned at once, and heard a horse slide in a swerving turn.

Then, as another horse drifted into the yard, the first one went charging back into the woods, its hoof pound rapidly diminishing.

Rennevant peered at the oncoming bronc. The animal stopped ten yards away, breathing hard and letting out a nervous snort as Rennevant moved toward it.

"Easy, boy," Rennevant soothed and wondered why this riderless animal had been deliberately hazed into the yard. Then, as his eyes focused to the darkness, he saw the vague shape of something slung across the saddle—and guessed instantly what it was!

Jules Larson said worriedly, "One of them rode back into the woods."

And Jeff Cruzatte asked, "Who is it Steve?"

"Turk Gallego," Rennevant muttered, and leading the bronc into the firelight, saw that his guess had been correct.

Gallego's hands and feet were tied to opposite stirrups, his head dangling grotesquely. The back of his shirt was stained a reddish brown between the shoulders and there was a Border Patrol badge pinned there. Blood ran down his neck, making gruesome patterns on his loose-jawed face.

"Shot in the back!" Jules Larson exclaimed.

Shock ran its quick course through these men; it held them in stiff astonishment.

Mrs. Larson demanded excitedly, "Who's shot in the back?"

She elbowed her way through the ring of silent men, took one brief look and turned hastily back to the Dutch ovens. "Don't look, Ruth," she warned. "It's—it's awful!"

(To be continued in the next issue)

Now is the Time To Prepare for a BRILLIANT PEACE-TIME CAREER

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862 Lindbergh Field, San Diego, California
Gentlemen:

Please send me your FREE 24-page book, "NEW HORIZONS OF OPPORTUNITY," and full information on R.A.I., including cost of training, and job opportunities.

Name..... Age.....

Street .....

City..... State.....

Trail's End Roll Call

From all points of the compass, members flock to the fold of the Trail's End Club. Welcome, Newcomers!

Miss Trixie Andrew, 31 Cisco St., Southbridge, Mass.
Miss Frances Barley, 1049 Lehigh St., Fullerton, Penna.
Mr. Leonard Berg, Box 493, Osakes, Minn.
Miss Evelyn Caffey, R. 1, Tye, Texas
Miss Ruth Caffey, R. 1, Tye, Texas
Miss Lorraine Carl, Box 396, Brownsville, Ore.
Miss Betty Jean Clark, Box 16, Odem, Texas
Mr. Donald Coburn, 940 E. 3rd Ave., New York, 22, N. Y.
Mr. Jesse Cook, R. 5, Box 624, Fresno, Calif.
Miss Ruth Cooper, Jamestown, Tenn.
Miss Dorothy Days, R. R. 1, Ashley, Ind.
Mr. Jack Donahue, Box 224, McCloud, Calif.
Mr. Earnest Echols, 65 Mitchell St., S. W., Atlanta, Ga.
Mr. Lynn Evans, 323 E. 3rd St., Rupert, Ida.
Mr. Gene Falwell, R. 1, Box B-132, Ft. Gibson, Okla.
Miss Maggie Franks, Russellville, Ala.
Miss Virginia Gray, Box 135, Northwood Narrows, N. H.
Mrs. Molly M. Grubb, 803 Quarry St., Marietta, O.
Mrs. Anna Hatfield, 60 Prince St., Trenton, N. J.
Mrs. Anna R. Janiak, 1348 Myrtle Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Miss Geneva Jarrett, R. 2, Box 32, Tyronza, Ark.
Miss Icy Jenkins, R. 3, Hillsville, Va.
Miss Barbara McNally, 2319 S. Wilkenson St., Tacoma, 3, Wash.
Miss Ilona Marias, 1920 S. Kedzie Ave., Chicago, Ill.
Mr. Dickie Moore, 715 S. Walnut St., Fairmount, Ind.
Mr. Harold D. Schon, Hallton, Penna.
Miss June Scott, P. O. Box 111, Perris, Calif.
Mr. Peter E. Schartz, Jr., 538 Stowe St., Jamestown, N. J.
Mrs. Emery W. Swick, 4260 Neosho, Venice, Calif.
Miss Frances Tabor, Box 121, Claypool, Ariz.
Miss Ella Tatlow, 401 Laguna, Klamath Falls, Ore.
Miss Clara Pat Tollett, 313 Evans St., Uvalde, Texas
Miss Helen Willis, c/o V. Lemley, Box 128, Las Cruces, N. M.

Until the war is over it will not be possible for us to offer Trail's End pins and buttons, for metal is now needed for war uses. However, it is still possible to become a member of the friendly Trail's End Club. All you have to do is fill out the coupon here below and send it in to the Trail's End Club, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. Your name will then be added to our membership rolls and published on the Trail's End page of the magazine.

TRAIL'S END MEMBERSHIP COUPON

I wish to enroll as a member of the Trail's End Club of RANCH ROMANCES.
(Please print your name and address and check whether you are Miss, Mrs., or Mr.)

Miss
Mrs.
Mr. .....

Address .....

City ..... **State**..... 2-11-44

OUT OF THE CHUTES

WITH TEX SHERMAN

Editor's Note: Tex Sherman, who gives you rodeo news hot off the griddle, is personally acquainted with performers and producers from coast to coast. Have you any question you'd like answered about any particular rodeo or contestant? Write Tex Sherman in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York, 22, N. Y. Be sure to enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope, and Mr. Sherman will send you a prompt reply.

The rodeo's on, folks. Here they come, "Out of the Chutes" and into the arena, Tex Sherman announcing!

IN TUSCON they staged a rodeo with plenty of hands on the job—cowboys from the ranches, soldiers, sailors and marines, also war workers; anyone in fact who wanted to try his hand at rodeoing. With all these brand new riders, the stock had a holiday. The rodeo was sponsored by the Tuscon Division of the Vultee Consolidated Company, whose workers found broncs as hazardous as bombers.

Some new feminine talent showed up at Madison Square Garden this year, for instance Mitzi Lucas, beautiful daughter of the Tad Lucas called by many the greatest cowgirl of all time. This was Mitzi's first trip to the Garden, and she made a big hit with the newspaper men of the big city. Mitzi, though it's her ambition to be a great cowgirl like her mother, wants to get into something to help win the war. When she left New York she was planning to go into a defense plant in Tuscon.

Under the guidance of Florence Randolph, another veteran cowgirl and a fine one, newcomer Nancy Bragg made New York sit up and take notice. Nancy is pretty and graceful and a darn good trick rider.

New York missed Vern Goodrich, trick roper and rider, this year, as well as his wife, Myrtle. Vern is in the Army, formerly stationed at Fort Riley, Kans., and now somewhere in Nebraska. Myrtle, who didn't get to the Garden rodeo because she was visiting Vern at camp, is the daughter of those famous rodeo folks, Lil and Cy Compton.

Manuel Enos, who treated himself to a new Stetson for the New York rodeo, was called by his draft board shortly thereafter and is now wearing an overseas cap.

Mayor Harmon W. Peery of Ogden, Utah, tells us that their rodeo did a record-breaking business. Though it looked for a time as if that show would be called off this year, Hizzoner kept the horse opera alive, and it's one of the big 10 of the rodeo circuit. Among the mayor's guests were Abbott and Costello and Frank Moore of the Garden taking a busman's holiday.

Word has reached us that Waddie Capehart, well known California contestant, died while riding in the car of Jimmy Hough, another top-hand. Both boys had just finished a rodeo where they'd contested in the calf-roping, and were returning home. Waddie told Jimmy he wanted to catch some sleep and for Jimmy to wake him up when they got home. When Jimmy tried he found that Waddie's heart had stopped. Waddie's brother took charge and laid him to rest in Colusa. Thus passes another top-hand.

We hear that Ike Rude and Everett Shaw have challenged any two steer-ropers to a matched roping contest, which should be something. Each roper is to rope 10 steers for a $2500 pot. Any of you ropers interested contact King Merritt at Federal, Wyo.

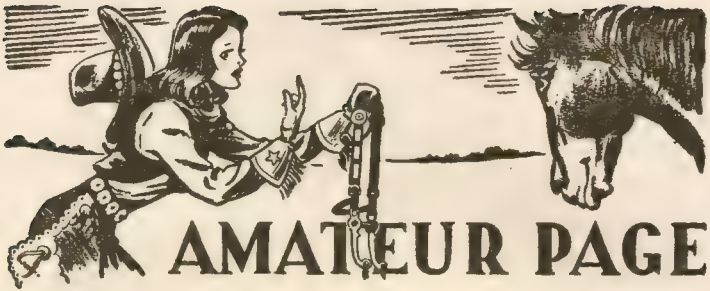
We hear tell: That Dick Griffith and his pretty wife are expecting a new trick and wild steer rider pretty soon. Dick hopes it's a boy. . . . That Mrs. Perry Ivory accidentally fell off a corral fence where she was watching the boys bust out some broncs. Donna Cowan, all-round cowgirl champ, came to the rescue and is taking care of Mrs. Perry. Donna is the wife of Norman Cowan, for many years a consistent winner in bronc-riding. Donna is no slouch herself; she has ridden for such famous rodeo producers as the late Charley Irwin and Harry Walters of Cheyenne.

Out in Lenapah, Okla., Fred Lowry has designed a new roping saddle which is fast proving its popularity. The Veach Saddlery Co. of Trenton, Mo., is manufacturing it. Lowry, incidentally, is 6 times winner of the steer-roping at the Cheyenne Frontier Days.

A successful rodeo was put on in Fallon, Nev., where the net proceeds went to various war relief agencies. Milt Tayor directed the arena and Bob Barmby furnished the bucking stock, which was rough as they come. Steve Shannon not only clowned the show but saved many a cowboy from injury by keeping those fighting Brahma bulls off the riders as they dismounted.

Adios,

Tex Sherman



AMATEUR PAGE

This page is made up of original pieces of cartoons, verses or prose pertaining to the West, written by our readers. Our only requirements are that the persons submitting material be amateurs and that all material be original with the person submitting it. For each contribution published we shall pay the writer (or artist if it is a cartoon) two dollars. More than one contribution may be submitted by any one person.

Address all contributions to The Amateur Page, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York, 22, N. Y. No submissions will be returned, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding them.

My Wish

NOW people say it's silly
To wish and wish, but you
Know that you've wished before,
And dreamed that wish came true.

So I will tell you of my wish.
I know you'll realize
How much I want it to come true.
I hope you'll sympathize!

I'd like to be a cowgirl,
And ride the open range
On the swiftest pinto pony
That ever rode the plains.

I want a white sombrero,
A branding iron and rope,
And I'd like to build a campfire
Out on a lonely slope.

I'd want to break a bronco
Out in a big corral,
Or maybe just go riding
On a beautiful sorrel. . . .

And hear the wind a-whistling
As it ripples through his mane
And we gallop 'long the river
Or across the lonely plain.

And then I'll wed a cowboy
That's brave and true and fine,
Someone to love and cherish
And be forever mine.

I want to ride and rope and sing
The song that I love best.
And I'm sure if God is willing,
Someday I'll go out West.

Wanda Jackson, Holton, Ind.

Pride of the Rodeo

A LEATHER saddle, a silver spur,
A cowboy mounted on a coal black mare,
His hat pushed back, his 'kerchief flyin',
He's the pride of the rodeo, there's no denyin'.

His horse steps high, his saddle creaks,
My heart does tricks when that cowboy speaks;
His lariat swings, his dark eyes glow,
He knows he's the pride of the rodeo.

But before the dawn, on a train bound West,
He'll head back home, this son of the West;
Back to his pals that never change,
Back where he's the pride of the range.

Betty Combs, McKees Rocks, Penna.

Changing West

UNDER the rim rocks, painted red,
Many a cowboy has lain his head;
Near the old water holes where herds go by,
'Midst the burning sands and the alkali.

The glittering stars so dazzling bright
Pierce the darkness of the night.
Spirits of those long laid to rest
Hover near—there's a changing West.

Wagon trails swept out by endless rail,
Stagecoaches gone that once carried mail,
Longhorned cattle are seldom seen
On once endless prairies, now pasture green.

Camp cook with his "Come an' get it," yell
Has long been replaced by the dinner bell;
Shooting scrapes and cowboys' jests,
Ever gone—there's a changing West!

Irene Scott Pray, Amarillo, Texas

Little Old Soddy

LITTLE old soddy, standing alone,
Would you tell of the dreams you are hiding?
Of your former occupants, departed and gone,
Of their faith, hope and love so abiding?

Would you speak of the prairie's turbulent wind,
Of the spring's soft, mild breeze so caressing?
Or the farmer, so sturdy, his magical thoughts
Of the future rich harvests, obsessing?

Would you mention wildflowers, the prairie's delight,
Or the joy of the meadow lark singing?
Little old soddy, to dust soon to turn,
Could you tell what the future is bringing?

Daisy Patterson Jacobs, Lenora, Kans.

NOTE: The word "soddy" is a localism for sod house, the type of building erected by the early pioneers, but very rare at the present time. D.P.J.

We'll Settle Down

WEST of the Red River Valley,
West of the high rocky peaks,
We'll settle down in the valley
And happiness there we will seek.

We'll settle dwon in the valley,
Build up a dream house for three;
And then grow a garden of flowers,
Live happy and healthy and free.

When the sun sinks behind a high mountain,
Evening breezes come cool as the rain,
We'll settle down in the valley,
And live our dreams over again.

Mrs. Beulah E. Smith, Seattle, Wash.

Cowboy's Dream

THERE'S a campfire glow on the prairie,
And a silvery moon o'er head,
And a coyote's howl in the lonely night
As a cowboy makes his bed.

The stars look down in sympathy
While he rests his weary head;
And his faithful horse keeps vigil
While he dreams of his own soft bed.

And a girl with hair that's golden,
And a smile that's his alone;
When the roundup days are over
He'll head for Home, Sweet Home.

Lula Perkins, Mooresville, N. C.

OUR AIR MAIL

"Our Air Mail" has for years been running between readers of Ranch Romances and has enabled many people to make worth-while friends. You may write DIRECTLY to anyone whose letter is printed in this department. Remember that all letters should reflect the clean, wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances and contain nothing objectionable. The addresses given are complete. If no country is mentioned, it is the U. S. A.

This department is intended only for those who actually wish correspondents. We ask you therefore to refrain from using it as a medium for playing jokes and particularly request you do not sign your letters with other people's names. Address letters for publication to "Our Air Mail," Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y.

Call Her Rusty!

Dear Editor:

Although I am not lonely, I'd like to hear from lots of people. Writing letters is my favorite pastime and I'll do my best to make them interesting. My name is Ruth, but my pals call me Rusty. I'm 17 years of age and have brown hair and eyes. My hobbies are many, and among them are collecting postcards and Western songs. Would enjoy hearing from everyone, but especially rodeo performers and ranch people. Come on, folks, and make my mailbox overflow.

RUSTY HILL.

166 Grant Ave.,
Jersey City, 5, N. J.

Arizona Boy in California

Dear Editor:

I'm a 16 year-old boy and have brown eyes and curly black hair. I was born in Arizona, but now live here in California. Would very much like to hear from boys and girls from 14 to 20. My hobbies are collecting postcards and bicycling. Please, write!

GILARDO BORBOA

2912 Michigan Ave.,
Los Angeles, 33, Calif.

Lonely Georgian

Dear Editor:

Is there any chance for a lonely girl from Georgia getting a few pen pals? I always get the greatest pleasure from RANCH ROMANCES. I'm 18 years of age, have long brown curly hair and gray eyes. Like horseback riding, basketball and dancing. Please help me in my loneliness. Will answer all letters received.

MARIE DAVIS

311 Fernwood Ave.,
Dalton, Ga.

Shut-In

Dear Editor:

I've been a reader of RANCH ROMANCES for years and really think its stories are tops. I am a shut-in at present and would like some pen pals. So come on, folks, between the ages of 30 and 40, fill my mailbox for me. My hobbies are writing letters and collecting stamps. Will answer all letters.

GEORGE E. STILL

Tempe San.,
Tempe, Ariz.

Stranger in Big Town

Dear Editor:

Is there any chance of a once-country-girl to get a few pen pals? I'm so lonesome here in this big city. I've been here just two months and I'm still a stranger. I sure miss the wide open spaces and free life in the northeastern Missouri hills. I'm 15 years old and have long brown curly hair and blue eyes. I've a twin sister who's my best pal, but she lives in Michigan. I'm a mixture of German, Scotch, Jewish, English, French and Indian! Please help me in my loneliness.

DIXIE SCOTT

2703A Sullivan Ave.,
St. Louis, 7, Mo.

Blue-Eyed Blonde

Dear Editor:

Can a lonely girl from the good old Pine Tree State crash Our Air Mail? I'm a blue-eyed blonde, 19 years of age and I stand five feet four inches tall. My hobbies are writing letters and collecting snapshots. Will exchange snaps with all who write. Come on, boys and girls, from 16 to 60, drop me a line. I promise to answer all letters.

AVIS BRYANT

R.F.D. No. 2,
Belfast, Me.

Kansas Farm Lad

Dear Editor:

I'm a reader of RANCH ROMANCES and like it very much. I am a 13 year-old boy with blue-gray eyes and blond curly hair. I live on a farm and have my own saddle horse. Would like to correspond with boys and girls everywhere. My nickname is Curly. My hobbies are reading, horseback riding and motorcycling.

BILL HUMPHREYS

R. R. 3,
Ulysses, Kans.

Drop a Line to Jersey

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of 20 years of age and would love to hear from anyone, any age, from all over the country. Have been quite ill and the only enjoyment I get out of life is writing and receiving letters. So, come on, friends, and drop me a line.

MYRTLE SWEENEY

5 Green St.,
Bordentown, N. J.

Drop Her a Few Lines!

Dear Editor:

Can you find room in your column for a girl with blue eyes, brown hair and a fair complexion? I enjoy jitterbugging, swimming and figure skating, and I also do some skiing. Would like to hear from boys and girls all over, especially cowgirls and cowboys. Everyone from 16 to 20, drop a few lines to me and I'll answer promptly.

JEANNINE STIRLING

5204 5th Ave.,
Rosemount, Montreal,
Canada.

Cherokee Miss

Dear Editor:

I'm an Indian and belong to the Cherokee tribe. Am 13 years old, but am tall and slender. I really love to write letters, so come on and write. Would like to hear from anyone from 6 to 60!

ELEONORA COOKSEY

R. 4, Box 286,
Stillwell, Okla.

Double R Fan

Dear Editor:

Will you please print my plea for pen pals in RANCH ROMANCES for me? I am 45 years old and have brown hair and hazel eyes. I've been enjoying RANCH ROMANCES stories for 6 years or more. Hope someone will answer this plea. Thank you.

MRS. ANNA MILLS

40 Taber St.,
Patchogue, L. I., N. Y.

Cape Cod Pal!

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of 17 who'd like to hear from girls from all over the nation. I have dark blond hair and brown eyes. My main interests are writing letters and bowling. Promise to answer each letter as promptly as I possibly can, so won't everyone between 16 and 28, who wants a pen pal from Cape Cod, please write!

BETTE SAWYER

S. Harwich,
Cape Cod, Mass.

Hoosier Girl

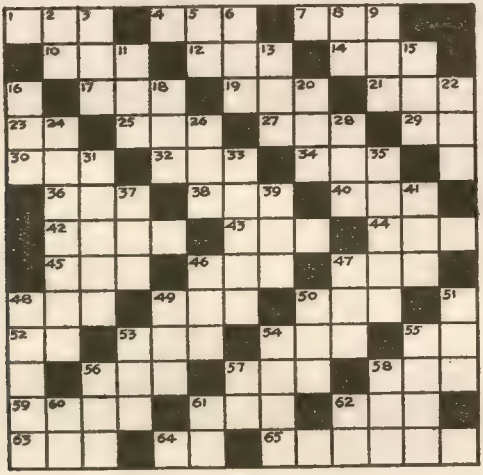
Dear Editor:

I am a true Hoosier girl of 14 years of age. Is there a place for me in your column? I've light brown hair and dark eyes. Most people think me pretty. I enjoy horseback riding and music. Will be glad to exchange snaps. Come on, pals, from 14 to 20, write to a lonesome gal.

PAT O'BRIEN

R. R. 1,
Vincennes, Ind.

. The Westerners' Crossword Puzzle .



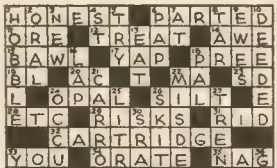
The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. A small mule
5. A feline
7. The lower part of the face
10. The same
12. Strife
14. The vital fluid of plants
17. To yelp
19. Twice
21. A fruit in a hard shell
23. Pound (Abbrev.)
25. Condensed water vapor
27. To unclose (Poetic)
29. Mixed type
30. A mischiveous spirit
32. The lightest form of matter
34. Land measures
36. Exist
38. Timid
40. Consumed
42. House (Spanish)
43. Ever (Contraction)
44. Before
45. An outfit
46. To soak
47. A writing implement
48. Everything
49. To shock
50. Unhappy
52. Dysprosium (Abbrev.)
53. Beige
54. A cooking vessel
55. Company (Abbrev.)
56. Not bright
57. A cushion
58. A close friend
59. Near the ear
61. Belonging to that thing
62. A male human
63. A male offspring
64. Indefinite article
65. Midday rest

DOWN

2. Yes (Spanish)
3. Underhand
5. An exclamation
6. A projection on a filing card
8. Like
9. Pale
11. A young goat
13. River (Spanish)
15. A young dog
16. A brewed drink
18. A plug
20. A mineral spring
22. To unite with a knot
24. Darkly
26. Past tense of "to be"
28. A long period of time
31. Not strong
33. Thin
35. A spirited horse
37. Established (Abbrev.)
39. Nevertheless
41. A sea eagle
46. Moved swiftly
47. Pertinent
48. Farewell (Spanish)
49. A sweet fruit conserve
50. Turf
51. The sun
53. A twitching of the face
54. To go by
55. To incline
56. A great noise
57. Pint (Abbrev.)
58. Belonging to father
60. Toward
61. Within
62. A pronoun



Solution to the First February Puzzle

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

By Professor Marcus Mari
THE *STARS* AND THE *WAR* AND *YOU*
Man of Aquarius . . . Jan. 20—Feb. 19

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to anyone who sends this coupon to him in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

Name .....Sex .....

Address .....

.....

Exact date of birth: Year.....Month.....Day of Month..... 2-11-44

THE sea and all that sails upon it are the life-forces behind the Aquarius man. His is the Sign of the Water-Bearer, and he is a born sailor. He usually loves boats and ships and has a way with them, whether sailing them or building them. His love of adventure, of travel is apt to take him to far, strange ports and places, and his gift of adaptability will keep him content in whatever odd environments he finds himself.

Usually a quiet, easy-going person, the Aquarius man can be tempestuous and raging when aroused to fighting anger. He has a keen sense of justice and honor and will always be one of the first to rush to the defense of the helpless. There is none of the bully in the Aquarius man.

If unable to enter actively in the war effort, the Aquarius man may find an outlet for his talents in some field that can use his genius for detail and concentrated work. He is careful, conscientious and an excellent craftsman. And he has amazing vitality.

The Aquarius man often finds himself falling in and out of love with disturbing frequency, but once he finds the real love of his life, he is constant and content. He makes an excellent father, partially because he remains much of a boy at heart no matter how numerous his years, and partially because of his great depths of understanding.

The Zodiac sign of the Water-Bearer also gives the fortunate person born under it rather special talents: He is usually a very good dancer, and he is always entertaining and witty. Perhaps his most special gift is the ability to follow and copy the moods of whatever person he happens to be with at the moment. This ability makes him very popular with his fellow men.

Despite the horrors of the War, it happens to offer to the Aquarius man an outlet for his gifts of the Water Sign, and it is not at all unlikely that the end of the War will find him high on top of his chosen profession.

UNSUSPECTED POWER

The Mysterious Influence In The Air You Breathe!

THE SOUL OF THE UNIVERSE is in the air you breathe. Deposited in your blood—with each inhalation you take—is *the intelligence* that directs the course of the planets through the misty reaches of space, and the strange phenomenon of life itself.

What is it that causes your heart to beat, your lungs to expand and contract? What mind directs *the cells* of your being, each in their purpose—some to create bone, others tissue and hair? What *consciousness* pervades these vibratory *globules-of life* and gives them awareness of their Cosmic function?

Are you one of the millions who have looked *beyond yourself* for some external Divine Power or agency? Have you searched in vain for some outer sign or word of Divine assurance when in doubt or in need? Now learn of the *unsuspected power* that exists in every simple breath—and that becomes *part of you.* The ancient Egyptians believed that the essence of life was borne on the wings of the air. The Bible proclaims that with the first breath man becomes not just an animated being—but a *"living soul." Try this experiment,* and prove a Vital Life Force exists in the air. When you are in pain or despondent take a deep breath. Hold it as long as comfortable—then notice the momentary relief.

This Amazing Free Book.

Would you seriously like to know how to draw upon this Intelligence of the Cosmic, with which the air is permeated? You can use it to awaken the creative powers of your mind, and for making life an experience of *achievement.* Use the coupon below for a free copy of the book, "The Mastery of Life." It tells how in the privacy of your home *you may learn* to use these simple, useful, *natural laws.*

USE THIS GIFT COUPON

Scribe V.Z.H. The Rosicrucians (AMORC)
Rosicrucian Park, San Jose, California

I am sincerely interested in learning how to use the mysterious influences of the universe in the betterment of my life. Please send me a free copy of the book, "The Mastery of Life."

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

Rosicrucians are NOT a religious organization

THE ROSICRUCIANS (AMORC) SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, U. S. A.

HOW JOE'S BODY BROUGHT HIM FAME INSTEAD OF SHAME

HEY! QUIT KICKING THAT SAND IN OUR FACES!
THAT MAN IS THE WORST NUISANCE ON THE BEACH
LISTEN HERE, I'D SMASH YOUR FACE··· ONLY YOU'RE SO SKINNY YOU MIGHT DRY UP AND BLOW AWAY.
THE BIG BULLY! I'LL GET EVEN SOME DAY
OH DON'T LET IT BOTHER YOU, LITTLE BOY!
DARN IT! I'M SICK AND TIRED OF BEING A SCARECROW! CHARLES ATLAS SAYS HE CAN GIVE ME A REAL BODY, ALL RIGHT! I'LL GAMBLE A STAMP AND GET HIS FREE BOOK!
BOY! IT DIDN'T TAKE ATLAS LONG TO DO THIS FOR ME! WHAT MUSCLES! THAT BULLY WON'T SHOVE ME AROUND AGAIN!
LATER
WHAT! YOU HERE AGAIN? HERE'S SOMETHING I OWE YOU!
OH, JOE! YOU ARE A REAL MAN AFTER ALL!
HERO OF THE BEACH
GOSH! WHAT A BUILD
HE'S ALREADY FAMOUS FOR IT!

—actual photo of the man who holds the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

I Can Make YOU A New Man, Too in Only 15 Minutes A Day!

If YOU, like Joe, have a body that others can "push around"—if you're ashamed to strip for sports or a swim—then give me just 15 minutes a day! I'll PROVE you can have a body you'll be proud of, packed with red-blooded vitality! "*Dynamic Tension*." That's the secret! That's how I changed myself from a spindle-shanked, scrawny weakling to winner of the title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

"Dynamic Tension" Does It!

Using "*Dynamic Tension*" only 15 minutes a day, in the privacy of your own room, you quickly begin to put on muscle, increase your chest measurements, broaden your back, fill out your arms and legs. Before you know it, this easy, NATURAL method will make you a finer specimen of REAL MANHOOD than you ever dreamed you could be! You'll be a New Man!

FREE BOOK

Thousands of fellows have used my marvelous system. Read what they say—see how they looked before and after—in my book, "Everlasting Health And Strength."

Send NOW for this book—*FREE*. It tells all about "*Dynamic Tension*," shows you actual photos of men I've turned from puny weaklings into Atlas Champions. It tells how I can do the same for YOU. Don't put it off! Address me personally: Charles Atlas, Dept. 9B, 115 East 23rd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9B
115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

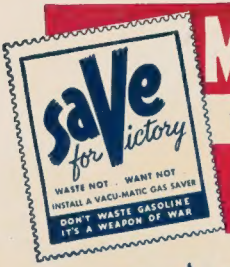
I want the proof that your system of "*Dynamic Tension*" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City ..... State.....

☐ Check here if under 16 for Booklet A



MOTORISTS *Wanted!*

TO MAKE THIS ***UNIQUE TEST...***

of GAS SAVINGS

UP TO **30%** GAS SAVINGS

Car Owners: You are invited to make a gas saving road test with the Vacu-matic on your own car, with the absolute understanding that unless it proves to you that it will save you up to 30% on gas and improve your car performance, the test will cost you nothing. Investigate this remarkable discovery that trims dollars off gasoline bills—gives you worthwhile gas savings—more power—quicker starting—more miles on less gas.

Automatic Supercharge Principle

Vacu-matic is *entirely different!* It operates on the supercharge principle by automatically adding a charge of extra oxygen, drawn free from the outer air, into the heart of the gas mixture. It is entirely automatic and allows the motor to "breathe" at the correct time, opening and closing *automatically* to save dollars on gas costs.

Proven By Test

In addition to establishing new mileage records on cars in all sections of the country, the Vacu-matic has proven itself on thousands of road tests and on dynamometer tests which duplicate road conditions and record accurate mileage and horse power increases.

Fits All Cars—Easy to Install

Vacu-matic is constructed of six parts assembled and fused into one unit, adjusted and *sealed at the factory.* Nothing to regulate. Any motorist can install in ten minutes. The free offer coupon will bring all the facts. Mail it today!

The Vacu-matic Co., Wauwatosa, Wis.

Sworn Proof of Gas Savings

This certifies that I have carefully read 300 original letters received from Vacu-matic users testifying to gas savings up to 30%, many reporting added power, smoother running, and quicker pick-up. These letters are just a small part of the larger file of enthusiastic user letters that I saw at the company offices.

Signed

Notary Public

AGENTS Get Yours FREE For Introducing

Vacu-matic offers a splendid opportunity for unusual sales and profits. Every car, truck, tractor, and motorcycle owner a prospect. Valuable territories now being assigned. If you help us introduce it to a friend, you can obtain your own free. Check and mail coupon today.

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7617-81S W. State St., Wauwatosa, Wis.

Please send full particulars about VACU-MATIC, also how I may obtain one for my own car FREE. This does not obligate me in any way.

Name .....

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☐ Check here if interested in Agency Proposition.